DOCTOR WHO NOVELLAS

FRAYED

TARA SAMMS

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FOREWORD BY STEPHEN LAWS

WHAT I REMEMBER VERY CLEARLY ABOUT 1963 AS AN ELEVEN YEAR OLD BOY IS

how desperately dull British television could be.

Back then, Westerns were at the height of their popularity, and whereas we had a glut of programmes from the United States like Champion the Wonder Horse and The Lone Ranger, the indigenous product for kids was pretty tepid and boring stuff. With a passion for science fiction, fantasy and horror and fired by Famous Monsters of Filmland Id beg my parents to let me stay up late to watch the all too rare grownup shows that delved into the forbidden zones shows such as Quatermass and the Pit, The Voodoo Factor, The Monsters, Twilight Zone, Tales of Mystery or A for Andromeda (a pleasure more often denied than granted).

Apart from the very occasional childrens series like Pathfinders in Space, Pathfinders to Mars and Pathfinders to Venus which I watched avidly most of the shows that promised science fiction adventure were crashingly disappointing. I still remember my frustration at a series called The Chem-Lab Mystery very Boys Own, very public school, very flat and terribly boring.

And then, my life was changed one day in 1963 by the arrival of a television series that gave me everything Id wanted and more.

The very first Doctor Who adventure began with the same sort of promise that other kids serials had back then. The mysterious Susan, and her even more mysterious grandfather. The suggestion that all was not as it seemed. The Chem-Lab Mystery, and so many other serials of its kind, had also started with the promise of exciting and fantastic events to come only to chicken-out in the resolution. The mysterious events would all be explained in a flat, realistic way. I tuned in to Doctor Who, hoping and praying that it wouldnt be like the others. You wouldnt believe my joy when the teachers, Ian and Barbara, entered the telephone box and discovered the interior world of the TARDIS. At that moment, I knew that I wasnt going to be let down by this series.

And then, a couple of time travel adventures down the line, the Doctor

and his companions arrived on a certain planet Skaro and my life was never the same again.

Because that was when kids all over the UK had their first encounter with… the Daleks! The effect was astounding. I remember that my entire school was buzzing with excitement the day after that first appearance. My dinosaur obsession soon gave way to a Dalek obsession.

Its time for a confession; something Ive never mentioned in interviews or articles before, and Im shamelessly using this introduction to Tara Samms excellent novella to make it. In 1965, obsessed with all things Whovian, I wrote a story proposal for a Doctor Who adventure that involved the Dalek invasion of a planet ruled by alien brains-inglass-bottles, and sent it off to the BBC. I havent had a reply yet, but Im still hopeful.

Most genre writers of my generation readily acknowledge their childhood debt to Doctor Who some of us, like Stephen Gallagher, even went on to write for the series and thats why Ive been talking in this introduction about childhood experience.

However, the book you are now holding in your hands is a superb example of the new direction in which Telos Publishing has taken the Doctor Who phenomenon. Whilst remaining true to the original spirit of the Doctor, his companions and their protagonists, the novellas have taken the initiative to move into new, adult and challenging areas. Frayed is a perfect example, dealing with foetal genetic manipulation. But thats all Im going to say about the plot, since the pleasure of reading must be all yours.

One of the joys of the television series was the deft way in which the Doctor and his companions could arrive in a plot-in-progress and become part of the action in a seamless way. Tara does this, in a clever non-expository way, setting the tone for what is to come. Its some time, I confess, since I saw William Hartnell s portrayal of the Doctor but his persona is imprinted in my minds eye and encountering him again courtesy of Taras tale will, I m sure, give readers the same pleasure I experienced, as the reader can actually see William Hartnells body language courtesy of Taras prose. And theres a subtle and delightful explanation about names, which cleverly explains something that goes right back to the roots of the series again, something I wont elaborate on, but will leave you to discover for yourself.

Frayed is the work of a talented and wonderfully imaginative writer. Ive great pleasure in recommending it to you.

Time as the Doctor might say to read on.

Stephen Laws Newcastle-Upon-Tyne

FOR NAT AND DEN

I

I LIKE TO STARE INTO THE SUN, EYES WIDE. IT BURNS INCREDIBLE COLOURS INTO MY

head, great shifting continents of them that blot out all else. And I try to keep looking until I imagine all the pretty blue has boiled away from my eyes and they are left a bright, bloody red and quite sightless.

They catch me doing it and try to stop me, of course. I can tell them from far off.

Sometimes Mentor Parm rustles starchily to get me. Youll be blind before youre thirteen. Is that what you want? I slap her pudgy hands away, squirm from the cold of her shadow, but shes too vast and the sun doesnt have a hope of burning me for a moment longer. Im enveloped in her mint-scented bulk, scooped up and dumped in the quiet room or the infirmary, depending how bad Ive made myself this time.

Other times most times I guess its wily Mentor Baine who gets to me. Hes clever. He just knocks me over. Everyone shuts their eyes when their head cracks on concrete. The colours thump inside my head then, and sometimes they give me dreams. I like the dreams; company on those long, blank days in the medical wing.

They ask me why I do it, then ask themselves why I do not respect them. I was three years old when I came here. I have been here for eight, which is as long as Mentor Parm has been at the Refuge. I know all there is to know about her. She has watched me ever day but she doesnt see me at all. Baine is cleverer, wiry and old and stooped from the weight of carrying his big brains about with him. He looks at me and he sees only parts of a living machine; he does repairs, not medicine. He would rather watch Mentor Parm as she bustles about, stoops to carry, stretches up to reach things. Like I say, he sees only parts.

But Olmec sees me. He is not a medic. He tends the animals in our little zoo. The animals are part of our therapy, me and the other

children. Watching them keeps us diverted and amused. Tending them teaches us to be responsible. When they die we are reminded what will happen to us if we arent made well.

I love the animals, and I love Olmec. He knows I care for them more than anything, except him. And he knows why I stare at the sun. Tres Ojos, he calls me sometimes, which are words from his old language and mean Three Eyes. He knows I have an eye inside my head that can see too far. That is why I am kept here: so clever people can close the eye and leave me with two.

I would rather have no eyes at all if they did that. So I stare at the sun and spoil them. They ache and throb, pretend to be dead jellies under my burnt lids. Silly eyes that can be seen, that can be hurt.

They search in my head for the third eye. They shine lights in it, poke metal sticks into it. But they cant close it.

And they cant hear my smart mouth laughing.

ONE

FROM NOWHERE, A GREAT BOULDER APPEARED ON THE PLANETS BARREN SURFACE.

An old man walked from the rock. He peered up at the black sky. Some celestial hand had scattered its velvet with glittering stars and white gold moons, a display of jewels as fine as any he had seen. He tapped the notebook in his hand and corrected himself with a chuckle. As fine as any he had seen so far, for his journeys had barely begun.

He opened the notebook, happy that there was enough light to read and write by. He turned to a fresh page. This planet was not marked on his maps, and he wondered if he was the first to set foot here. Under the pale moonlight, the surface from here to the horizon seemed lifeless and bare, but he could hear the edgy scuttling of small animals as they foraged for food. And something else. A sound like old leaves carrying in the wind.

Fragments of something dry and crisp gusted in circles around his feet. He stooped to pick up one of the pieces, and immediately his curiosity was wakened. It felt warm and wet, and was fraying at the edges as if it had been ripped from a glossy fabric of some kind.

It pulsed between his fingers as though it lived. Child! he called crossly, peering closely at the strange material. Fetch some light and join me out here. As he spoke, the scrap of fabric pulsed wildly, grew hot in his hand. He dropped it, and the ground exploded at his feet.

***

William Mosely heard the distant sound and wished it could be thunder. But no storms blew on Iwa. The rains, when they came, were as an afterthought at the end of the hot day. The downpours never lasted longer than a few minutes, sometimes not even as many seconds. The muggy air never really cleared.

He wiped sweat from his forehead, checked under his arms. Despite the air conditioning, black stains sagged the rugged fabric, and he grimaced. The staff fatigues were pale beige, and showed every drop of sweat. At times like this, when he had to show his people he was calm and in control, to be sweating like a thief in court wasnt helpful.

The distant sound was an explosion, he knew. It was soon followed by another. The foxes were attacking again. One by one, the lights on his sector board flicked on fiercely as his ragged band of honorary guards called in to report. Who should he let speak first? It didnt much matter, he supposed. They would each say the same things.

Mosey went on just staring at the lights for a few seconds longer before stabbing out a finger. Sector two, report.

They blew in to the trash compound, sir. Webber until two weeks ago the chief librarian was trying to keep his voice calm and professional under fire, just as the training discs instructed. Theyre tearing up the place. Were barely containing them.

When you pressed the button to speak to a sector, the light started blinking off and on, lazily, sedately.

You must keep them out of the complex. Webber. Ill send you some back-up as soon as I can spare it.I

Yes, sir. Well do our best to hold them.

He signed off and the little light went out. Mosely saw that his hand was shaking as he hit the next button along. Sector three, report.

Casss voice crackled and spat into the command room. She, at least, was ex-army with field experience. Almost catatonic after months spent moving on loitering patients, shed flourished once the attacks began.

Fox driven back in blue area. It was trying to wrench open the vent covering, like before. Get to the dream chambers.

Mosely felt his uniform sticking to his sides. Did it succeed?

No. Repelled successfully. But… While she paused, the static filled up the dead space like an angry animal crawling closer. Its like they know whats in there.

Destroy it, Cass, Mosely said urgently.

It blew away under focused fire. Theres something else. A pause. Theres been a sighting of a human.

Human? Sector fours flashing light was winking at him seductively now. Mosely kept his voice carefully neutral. Could it be

reinforcements?

Salih saw it, said Cass. Said it looked like a girl. No uniform.

I see, sighed Mosely, and the hope was gone. That was the problem with every surviving member of staff being rostered to the perimeter defence for fairnesss sake. You wound up with drunken halfwits like Salih fighting the foxes.

Find the fox and kill it, he reiterated. Then get that vent cover fixed. And please, dont waste my time with any more phantoms. He slammed his palm down on the table, as if to squash any last specks of hope so they couldnt trouble him further.

Out, Cass said curtly, and killed contact.

Mosely stared wearily at the other little torches on his desk trying to catch him in their light, seeking him out. Desperate to tell him what his people were doing, how they were faring, as if any of it could really make much difference in the long run.

His finger hesitated over the display. Hed plump for the highest number first, this time, and work back down. Yes, that was what hed do. Sector ten, report.

not your enemy, I have only recently arrived. Do I have your assurance

Mosely started at the unfamiliar voice. It was old and imperious, put him in mind of a cranky king whose right to rule had been challenged.

Who is that? he snapped. Juniper, where

Im sorry, sir. Sir? You wont believe this, sir.

Juniper could exhaust Mosely with a single word. She was a sweet girl, and it seemed a sick shame to force a trained medic to fight and kill. But shed got on with the task in hand. For her, life, with its trials and hardships, seemed a source of endless excitement.

Theres a man here. A human, she said, incredulous.

Mosely sat up rigid in his chair. Where was he, Juniper?

Outside. Hes been injured, the aliens were going to kill him. We took him in

You did what?

I couldnt get through to you sir, Im sorry. But hes an old man, in pain. Non-hostile, just a bit of a temper. A human, sir.

Is he alone? There was another explosion, louder this time. Juniper? Repeat, is he alone?

Hes talking about a friend of his. Hes lost her. Mosely heard the synthesised crackle of a laser, and half-hearted battle cries from the rest of the would-be soldiers. Foxes attacking main gates. Shall attempt to repel. Juniper out.

Mosely shook his head. How could she sound so bright about everything? Whenever he pictured her, he saw her smiling up at him, nervous and hopeful for whatever she could get. When hed made her a sector head, shed called it an honour.

And now shed seen a human outside.

The indicator lights were still dancing in front of his eyes. Mosely raised his palm from the desk ready to patch through another sector. His hand had left behind a film of sweat. Hope wasnt so easy to crush.

II

OLMEC TELLS ME STORIES WHILE WE WAIT FOR MY TWO EYES TO HEAL. HE KNOWS I love the animals, and that I love him. He is sad that I hurt myself anyway, so that Parm and Baine or one of the others must take me away from my chores in the zoo.

So he sits with me and tells stories.

His stories are strange. He explains that they are myths; stories that his ancestors used to believe were true, but that he has added things to them, or missed things out, or forgotten things. So now they are just stories.

I understand myths. Like the myth of being healed. The myth of leaving this place with rosy cheeks and a big smile and eyes that see no deeper than clothes and skin.

And no smart mouth.

With three eyes, I can see Olmecs stories so clearly. They are colourful and funny.

I can picture the sons of the father god Hun-Hunahpu as they journey to the land where the death gods live. A bat god slices off young Hunahpus head but a turtle gives him a new one. In the end, he and his brother become gods too, and rise up to heaven to be the sun and the moon. Olmec tells me our sun the sun that lights Iwa, the sun I stare into is not Hunahpu or his brother Xbalanque. They rose to different heavens from a different world, one very far away in space.

I do not think there can be any gods watching from Iwas sky. If there were, the animals in the zoo would never have died when the attacks came, and bad things would never have happened to Olmec.

TWO

SHE HAD SEEN HORROR BEFORE, SEEN IT ON SCREENS OR THROUGH GLASS. BUT NOTHING

like the creature that chased her now, that reached out for real to get her.

It had blown together from scraps of wet flesh and rag: a huge, bipedal monster, tearing up the earth as it formed. Wet, newborn eyes had sighted her and narrowed to slits in the bestial face. Thick blood splashed from its ragbag body as it ran after her, arms outstretched. Louder than its crunching footsteps was the sound of its heavy jaws snapping open and shut, open and shut.

Her breath burnt in her chest. Her tunic was clinging to her childs body with sweat.

The dark landscape tumbled rocks and ledges to make her stumble. She was sure she would fall any second now. And then it would get her.

Where was Grandfather? What had happened to him?

Something reared up ahead of her, a dark mass. She couldnt stop in time, slapped into its muscled surface, cracked her head and shrieked.

The thing wasnt living, it was rock: a dark crag rising up from the stony ground.

She caught a flash of smoky luminescence inside it, like a flame reflected in dark glass.

There was an opening in the rock a thick metal panel had been curled away. She forced her way through it into a narrow tunnel. Behind her, she heard the creature doing the same.

She didnt dare look back, ran so hard that her feet felt as if they would crumble inside her dainty shoes. Her head was throbbing. Her body was incandescent as she flew through the darkness, melting away like a comet nearing the sun that pulls it round.

She was flying faster and faster. Her eyes could see only darkness, but

she wasnt afraid any longer. The black walls had opened up like arms to pull her inside, and now they held her fast.

The aliens thumped through the floodlit grounds. Their big fox heads stared round, oversized claws swept aside the boxes and barricades racked up in their way. They were making for the main doors, as always.

Concentrate your fire on the smallest one! Juniper yelled. She had noticed that the creatures would dither if you targeted the puniest of their number, and often they would break off their assault to rally to its defence. It bought you enough time to fall back and reform.

So she fired her gun again and again, till her hand cramped. Sometimes you could actually kill one that way, trap it in the blaze of light, make it sear and sizzle like raw meat tossed in a pan of hot fat.

The little one and it was still easily three metres tall squealed and fell back.

Its body began to unravel like snagged thread, spinning round and round until it dissolved into desiccated patchwork pieces that soon blew away.

Juniper shook her hand to ease her cramp. One of the other monsters watched her, its eyes wet and shiny. It hefted a metal crate high above its head and prepared to hurl it at the main doors.

Stop that one! yelled Juniper. Stop it, stop it!

But before the beast could do another thing, a howl tore out of its huge, sinewy throat. The creatures fellows stopped in their tracks. Juniper held her breath, willing them to join in. At last, another opened its jaws, and another, until the aliens were chorusing in an ululating shriek.

Juniper pushed up the protective visor hiding her face and let out a massive whoop of joy. Her ramshackle band of soldiers started to cheer too, the combined noise was deafening.

What is happening? What does that sound signify?

Juniper turned at the voice of the old man just behind her. Shed left him peeping out at the action, slumped behind the couch that had been pressed into impromptu service as part of the barricade. Now he was gazing at the creatures with keen interest, no trace of fear in his

face.

Bedtime, she said, beaming.

He looked at her, seemed flustered, looked shiftily about him. What… what are you talking about?

Watch now, she said.

There was a sick sort of beauty to the way the creatures seemed to dissolve into the air. First went the legs, the grey sinews and tissues beneath the glossy skin curling and crumbling. Then the fabric of the muscular torso splintered and cracked like old, perished rubber, grinding itself down to a powder, and only the black, fox-like head would be left hovering in mid-air. Finally that too flaked away like ashes of roses, leaving nothing.

Throughout the slow disintegration, Juniper tried and tried to get through to Co-ordinator Mosely. She knew he would be methodically, tirelessly checking in to each of the different sectors, learning the status of each group, and assessing the implications for the community as a whole.

Sector ten, report, came the tired voice.

Foxes repelled, sir. She put stiffness in her voice, just like a real soldier.

Well start tidying up. What would you have me do with the newcomer?

Bring him with you to debrief, Juniper. And Webber could use a pair of hands to clean up the trash compound. Out.

The old mans eyes were still fixed on the area where the creatures had been, as if he were scared to look anywhere else. Fascinating, he said distantly. Complete, controlled molecular disassembly.

Not so controlled, Juniper told him. We dont know for sure, but we think they wear themselves out attacking us. Their bodies cant take the strain. They wont be back for a while. She turned to her squad. All right: Mette, Thane, clear up here.

The rest of you get over to sector two.

The old man seemed to force himself to look at her. He looked almost

amused, in a cold sort of way. Why are these creatures attacking you?

We dont know, said Juniper. Now come on, let me help you get inside.

I require no assistance from you people, said the old man icily.

Juniper was losing patience. Just who are you?

I have shelter of my own that I must return to, the stranger said, once I have found my companion. Goodbye. With a small nod, he began to hobble away.

Stay where you are please: She signalled to Thane to block the rude devils way, kept her voice low and friendly. Weve been waiting for word from Earth, and now youre here, well, naturally you must meet with our Co-ordinator.

Must I, indeed? said the old man blandly. Then he smiled, charmingly. Come now, you show a crude reasoning intelligence, you can see I pose no threat to you, hmm?

You must let me go.

Juniper shook her head. Take him to the decontamination unit.

The stranger looked sharply at her. The what?

Youve been outside. Its regulations. Juniper nodded at Mette. Then Ill escort him to the Co-ordinator myself. She watched as, still protesting, the old man was escorted roughly away.

III

THERE ARE LOTS OF ANIMALS IN OLMECS STORIES. THEYRE VERY IMPORTANT, WHICH

is why the animals in the zoo were like the animals in the stories. The cats were like the giant jaguar gods that hold up the sky. The dogs were like Xolotl, who went to the underworld and dug up a special bone that grew into the first ever children.

And if you mixed all the birds and snakes together you would get great Gucumatz, the feathered serpent that made the world and everything in it.

It took Gucumatz a lot of goes to make people right. Olmec thinks he got bored and gave up in the end, which is why people are mostly bad.

I dream sometimes that it is one of my bones that Xolotl the dog-god drags up from the cold mud of the dead lands. Kind men water my bone with blood, and children like me grow from it. Theyre free to do as they choose. If they do something naughty they are punished. That is only fair. But they cant be punished for the things that they might do.

Or they would end up here, on Iwa.

Here is a terrible place, where we shouldnt see, and we cant speak. All we can do is let the mentors fix us.

THREE

WITH THE SKIRMISH ENDED, MOSELY CONTACTED EARTH.

He understood, of course, that Iwa was far from the major spaceways. He understood also that the fate of a refuge for future criminals didnt count for much among the peoples of this quadrant and that priorities were fixed. But Earth surely understood that, without help, everyone staff and patients alike would be massacred.

It took over an hour to send his terse message, even with distress codes; the nearest express outpost was at Aphelion, almost two days signal away, and the carrier sats in this part of space were archaic and incompatible. He imagined himself as one of a myriad tiny lights on an Earth Governors sector board. Perhaps his light was so dim by now that no-one could even see it any longer.

Finally a dolorous chime informed him his message had uploaded successfully to the carrier sats. He rose from his seat, clapping sarcastically, when he saw that a message was waiting for him in return. It had been sent on a priority channel, and was dated several days ago.

Moselys smile shone bright as a beacon for the time it took for the message to upload to his systems screen. Once a brief sponsorship message had played, a harassed-looking woman with short red hair appeared, presumably one of the sub-Governors of this quadrant caught at the end of another long day. She was beautiful to him; somebody new and different, someone who was her own responsibility, not his.

He tried to read her expression to tell if the news was good but it was impossible; she had the distant, stony look of someone for whom all life was couched in hard truths.

Co-ordinator Mosely, she said, glancing down at her notes, we have received your communication of twelve-seven, and may we convey our deepest regrets and sympathies for your worsening situation. Your distress protocols were noted but have been in a queuing system. Regrettably, we have no available craft in your sector to facilitate evacuation of the Refuge, and will be unable to send relief vessels for at least five months.

Mosely said nothing. It was irrational to talk back to a recording.

Our remote strategists suggest… The woman looked down at her notes again. Well, theres nothing here on how you might combat your aggressors; your recordings match nothing in the EBE database. In terms of practical action you can take, the best option would seem to be: you entomb yourselves, and as soon as possible. She nodded, apparently satisfied as she read on. You will find you have insufficient supplies for five months, but if your experts adapt the therapy chambers, you can place yourself in healing mode until the rescuers arrive. She looked back up at Mosely, almost expectantly it seemed to him.

Mosely giggled. Thanks for that, he said.

You will know that there are not sufficient chambers to support everyone, the woman went on. As Co-ordinator, the responsibility for deciding who among those in your care will survive is your own, but you are advised to place your staffs welfare over that of the patients. You may be assured that the Governor in subsequent enquiries shall support whatever choices you make. She composed her lips into a careful smile, encouraging and understanding. Good luck, Coordinator.

The sponsorship message played once more, and the screen darkened. Mosely stared at the beady blackness for several minutes. Then he dried his eyes, tried to prepare himself to face the debrief.

Juniper looked through the inspection panel at the stranger. He looked furious; his old, wasted body shrouded in just a white towel as the cleaning mists detoxified his skin.

The door slid open and Mette walked through. She held a beige bundle in her arms.

The only clean fatigues to hand, it seems, she said.

Juniper thanked her, took the outfit absently. What do you make of him, Mette?

Typical, isnt it? The first new man in six months and hes ready for the rest home.

Juniper smiled. Mette, slumped back against the wall, affected an air of utter gloom at all times, but her blue eyes still sparkled. At least hes experienced.

But too old to put it to good use.

From the oldest to the youngest: as she spoke, the door to Main Block slid open and skinny Salih stepped inside. Talking dirty, ladies? he inquired.

If we were talking dirty wed start with your hair, said Mette. Its filthier than your mind.

You sure about that? Salih rubbed his thatch of blond hair vigorously, shaking out cupfuls of dandruff. Juniper and Mette groaned together, and Salih grinned. His yellow teeth werent nearly as sharp as his high Slavic cheekbones.

Mette grimaced. The secret ingredient. This is why everything you cook tastes so disgusting. Shut it, Smiler, or Ill make sure you get something extra-special in your custard tomorrow. Juniper rolled her eyes. What are you doing here, Salih?

Just checking. He peered through at the stranger, and his smile dropped. No, thats not who I saw, he muttered. Outside I mean. Looks like he walked out of one of your history lessons, Mette.

So what did you see? asked Juniper. It was a girl. Young, dark hair, being chased by one of them. Mette rose and stretched. I wish youd lay off the cooking brandy before patrols, Salih. Juniper jerked her head at the decon chamber. He said something about a lost companion.

Lost for good if shes out there alone, sighed Mette. Anyway. Im going to freshen up before debrief. But youre helping me escort the old man!

Juniper protested. Salihs volunteered, she said, slapping his backside.

Uh-uh. No relationships allowed, Salih reminded her. Besides, youre old enough to be my… Mette gave him the most murderous of glances. …

sister. Juniper jumped as the completion signal sounded. Hes cooked, remarked Mette. Have fun.

As Mette disappeared into Main Block, Juniper opened the decon airlock and threw in the set of fatigues. Put these on, she said into the call grille.

The old man still clutched the towel around his bony frame. I will wear my own attire, thank you, he announced, not turning round to address her. Return my clothes to me.

Theyve been destroyed, said Juniper. The foxes carry themselves in tiny fragments. Clothes can be carriers for them. So, put on the uniform, please.

This is quite outrageous, protested the stranger. Youre right there, thought Juniper. Mette had given him a higher rank than her own.

Just then she jumped back with a shout. A static charge from the call grille had bitten through her chin. The passive hum of the life units hiccupped noisily, and the lighting dimmed for a few seconds.

Another power surge, said Salih. The third today.

Its a good thing, said Juniper, rubbing her jaw. The greater the number of surges, the more data Co-ordinator Mosely has to go on. Hes investigating personally.

Which translates as him sitting in his office and shaking.

Drop it, Salih.

Oh, come on, Juniper. I mean, I know youre soft on him

Im not!

Hes

losing it. Everyone knows it. If he doesnt bring word from Earth soon

Look, you may hate Mosely, thats fine. But I dont. So can we drop it? The decon door hissed slowly open and Juniper was grateful for the distraction. Quiet now. Im taking our new visitor to debrief.

Salih snorted. As usual, once Mette had gone, his cheerful young cynic act hardened into something a little nastier. You actually get more of a kick from playing soldiers than playing nurses, dont you?

Id rather be a fighting soldier than a shivering medic, if thats what you mean.

Shame Moselys hands are shaking too much to pat you on the head, isnt it?

Before she could kick his shins, the strange old man emerged wearing the clothes. He didnt look happy about it.

Juniper tried to compose herself. Ready to tell us who you are, now?

Am I a prisoner? he inquired haughtily.

Salih scoffed. No more than the rest of us.

The old mans face clouded as the orderly sloped into view from behind the door.

Extraordinary, he muttered, staring at him closely. Yes, quite extraordinary.

Salih shifted uncomfortably. Be sure to tell the Co-ordinator that, wont you?

Am I to be paraded to his office in chains, hmm?

Were not prison warders. Not even soldiers, really. Juniper tapped her finger against the insignia on the old mans lapel. See that? That says youre a doctor.

A doctor? The old man gave a wry smile. Well, its a noble profession, yes, particularly so among my… His eyes narrowed at Salih. Er… among my people.

Juniper looked at the stranger. What do you mean, your people?

He means, like the girl, said Salih.

Youve seen her? The old man rounded on him angrily. What have you done with her?

Ive not laid a finger on her, you old fool, Salih snapped back. Those creatures were chasing after her when I saw her last. And gaining. The old man fell very quiet. Juniper glared at Salih. Tactful, she muttered.

I must locate her, said the stranger, steepling his fingers, gazing into space in rapt concentration. I must.

What you must do is meet with our Co-ordinator, Juniper told him. Now. We can talk about everything.

Yes. Their new doctor was looking more agitated now. Yes, well, I suppose I must.

He looked around as if deciding which route to take, then favoured Juniper with a slightly baffled smile. Perhaps you could lead the way?

IV

I HAVE TOLD YOU THAT I LOVED OLMEC. I HAVE LOVED HIM EVER SINCE HE TOLD ME THE

story of the wind god that took away a girl.

The girl lived in the dead land, and was beautiful. Im not so beautiful, but Olmec is not a wind god, so it doesnt matter that much. The wind god stole the girl away from the dead land and she loved him for that. The two of them wanted to be together so they became a wonderful tree. He was one branch and she was the other, so they would be side by side always.

But the girls guardian followed them from the dead land, and she was angry. She split the tree in two, and the girls half was torn to tiny pieces and fed to demons.

The wind gods branch was left untouched. He regained his true shape, gathered what was left of her and planted the pieces in a field. But no new girls grew from it.

Just a plant that bore wine.

This is not a happy story, and nor is mine, I suppose. But not all stories can be happy. Did the hero sons really want to become the sun and the moon? To stop being heroes and so end their adventures forever? I dont believe it can be true. So when I stare at the sun, Im also staring right at Hunahpu the hero and saying: How come?

Sometimes I feel them inside me: Hunahpu the sun is my third eye; and my smart, smiling mouth, hidden in darkness, is like Xbalanque, the crescent moon. I am glad they are there, because it is lonely sometimes, now that I am in the dead lands.

Things arent really dead, here, of course theyre just not the same. Like the bone that was just a dead thing until it was taken back outside and watered well. It grew new flesh and became good, and obedient.

Made real by the blood spilt for it, maybe.

Meantime, I wait.

Things feel more real to me here than they ever did back in the Refuge. Especially the loneliness. Thats why I remember the stories, and have the company of heroes.

And the company of heroes great enemies.

But one day Olmec will come here, I know it. I tell him I love him, I think it. I wish he could hear me. I wish he could think it back to me. He hasnt said he loves me yet, inside or out. But it doesnt matter.

FOUR

THE WHISPERS IN THE ROOM BECAME AN EXCITED CHATTER AS JUNIPER AND SALIH

brought in the stranger. Webber turned hopefully to his neighbour, but she was engrossed already in wondering gossip with two friends. After a few seconds waiting awkwardly on the fringes of their conversation, he glanced quickly around for someone else with whom to share the moment.

No good. While everyone else had made the best of their long-term placements, getting together to share views and gossip and illicit bodily fluids, hed hidden away in the must and dust of his library. It was his little kingdom, largely ignored by everyone except the children, and it had been his prison also for a three-year stretch of relentless self-improvement. Hed been going nowhere, he wanted to be someone better than he was. And he liked lit extracts books, he preferred to call them, a fine, grand old word so it made sense to accept the position here. Especially since it was so much easier to deal with people from behind a desk, when all you had to do was watch, and your conversation was limited to How many titles?, No fine to pay or whatever.

The attacks had done for all that of course. Now he had to mingle and mix with all the others, and it was hard. Hed taken well to the fighting, better than he could have imagined; a late rebellion against forty uneventful years spent filing away his quiet affairs, avoiding adventure, shuffling bookishly between a handful of minor planets. But while people listened when he yelled and directed them through battle

much as they had listened when hed been handing out fines or hushing them in the quiet areas; he had been told he could put quite a scary look into his grey eyes

they never took notice of him anywhere else. It was as if when he shucked off the vivid red of the guard fatigues, he became invisible.

But as usual, just in case he wasnt, he tried not to slouch, held in his gut and smoothed his hair over his bald patch. Made out he was utterly self-assured, lost in his intelligent thoughts. He consoled

himself that he had one up on everyone else anyway. You could tell a lot about people from what they read.

He settled for watching, his usual role in the limited social situations the Refuge allowed. But the old man made an unhappy exhibit. His eyes flashed at Webber, and he looked away, embarrassed.

It seemed Mosely (preferred reading: biographies of the great and good and medical journals, no fiction) was tired of just looking, too. Be quiet everyone, he barked, and the room grew hushed and expectant.

He held himself stiff in his chair, his face grave as he addressed the newcomer.

Youll forgive the curiosity of my staff. Weve had no human visitors to Iwa since the last batch of patients and personnel were dropped here six months ago.

The new arrival looked round the room, nodding to himself knowingly, as if hed formed unpleasant opinions on all present and was now having them confirmed. Human,

he muttered, as if the word was foreign to him. Where are you from, if I may ask?

Mosely folded his hands into fists. His knuckles showed white. Well, Earth, of course.

The old man laughed maliciously. Well, if these attacks of yours keep up, I dare say youll be returning there.

We cant, snapped Mosely. No help is coming from Earth.

Webber felt the words like fists in the face.

He stared, slack-jawed and stunned, like everyone else.

A butch blonde with a buzz-cut elbowed him aside, pushing forward to the front. Her name was Cass (never been inside a library in her life), and she struck him, perhaps unfairly, as that most dangerous of characters: the ignoramus who thinks she can do anything, and who somehow rises to a position that allows her to try.

What do you mean, no helps coming? she demanded. Suddenly the room was filled with angry voices asking the same questions. The

stranger in the doctors uniform seemed mildly amused at their Coordinators evident discomfort.

Listen to me, shouted Mosely. The effort seemed to leave him drained, and when he spoke next, his voice was quiet and mournful. Im sorry, that was no way to break the news to you. But… Administration says were too distant from the Earth to be picked up before the scheduled flight next year.

The angry babble of backchat was led by the kitchen kid, Salih (habitual voyeur of erotic literature, too embarrassed to make withdrawals). And a bunch of FDs and the poor saps who help them dont matter enough to save, he called, right?

What about the Fringe Patrols? cried Mette (star borrower, devours every shelf and never skips a due date). Surely at some point Mosely shook his head. Apparently there are insurrections in the Inner Sector, which have taken priority over us. A lost cat would take priority over us, said burly Thane (comic books), to choruses of bitter agreement.

Juniper (romantic fiction, action-adventure, poems and self-help manuals) ran over to Mosely and stood by his side. Let him speak, she yelled, almond eyes flashing.

Jeers louder than before filled the room. Webber gathered from rumours that Juniper and Mosely had once been lovers, but they made an odd couple to Webber; she with all her energy, her jet black hair and impeccable oriental features, and he with his personality as grey as his hair and the tired, hangdog expression his sandy moustache could never spruce up.

Letting your nurses speak for you now, Co-ordinator? Cass inquired. We need forceful action! A directive council of war. With you presiding? Juniper scoffed.

With no help coming, were all weve got, Cass argued. No disrespect, Co-ordinator, but you knock morale further into the mud every time you speak.

There was more clamour, more angry disagreement. Webber bit his lip, wondered if he should join Juniper up there with the bewildered Mosely or side with Cass and Salih.

It seemed a time to nail your colours to the mast and he wasnt sure what to do. Why couldnt life come with written instructions?

Looking round the room with mounting dismay, Webber suddenly found he was shouting too. If Earth Administration arent sending help, how come hes here? He pointed at the stranger, all but forgotten in the recriminations. How come they sent us a new doctor?

The room fell quiet. Webbers cheeks flushed as a dozen pairs of eyes flicked between him and the stranger.

Thats right. Juniper flashed Webber a look that suggested she was pleased with him. Of course this doctors here to help. Arent you, doctor?

The new doctor said nothing. He merely gripped the lapels of his uniform and looked down at the ground.

He doesnt seem so sure, Salih remarked. And neither did you, earlier on.

It is for me to be sure, Salih. Mosely snapped. He stared at the newcomer, his face caught somewhere between fear and hope. A shell-shocked calm had fallen. The expectant silence hurt Webbers ears.

Doctor…? Mosely looked at him, eyebrows raised inquiringly. When the stranger still said nothing, he continued, not so much addressing his audience as reasoning aloud. The doctor here has no official status. That is why Earth Administration made no mention of him to me.

No, indeed, they could not have done, said the old man with a thin smile.

But we still have some friends close to home, dont we? Mosely shot him a knowing look. An unauthorised rescue mission.

The old man just smiled.

How do we know he isnt a spy? Cass demanded. One of them.

I dont think so. Mette shook her head. Why wait till now to wheel him out?

The strangers eyes twinkled. Besides, Im as human as you are, can you not tell?

Cass wasnt to be put off. All right then, where are your tags?

I lost them in the forced landing, madam. And Im afraid that I must ask you all for your help. More surprised mutterings. But Webber

thought he understood what was going on. Your ship, its damaged? Indeed, agreed the old man, and I cannot take any of you away in it. Mosely slumped back in his chair. The muttering began again in earnest. But… The old man paused impressively, and looked round at them

almost slyly. My missing companion can.

Mosely looked at Cass. The girl Salih saw.

Yes, you must find her and bring her here to safety, said the stranger.

Only she can pilot our craft. Where is this ship of yours? demanded Mosely. Our scanners detected nothing. It is screened, naturally. As an unofficial mission, we could hardly advertise our presence, could we? I didnt know that kind of technology existed, murmured Webber. The old man preened himself. I am a scientist and an engineer. A pioneer in both fields, you could say. Cass walked up to him, folded her arms. If your friend is out there on the surface, shes most probably dead.

Not necessarily, Juniper said quickly. Theres still a chance.

You must hurry, the old man urged Mosely. Organise a radial search from the spot she was last sighted. Yes, youre right. Mosely seemed to accept the order gratefully. Cass, take a patrol out and look for her. Cass glared at him, but said nothing. Webber bit his lip. Confrontations made him feel sick. Did you hear what I said? Mosely asked mildly. At last, Cass nodded. The old man clapped his hands together softly

and seemed well satisfied.

Ill need a hand-picked team, Cass added.

Mosely nodded stiffly. Of course. Ill leave it to you to organise.

She jabbed a finger at Juniper. Starting with her as my adjutant.

Juniper looked at Mosely, but he only nodded. Go with her, Juniper.

Cass hid her gleeful smile badly, and turned to the others. Any volunteers, then?

No one spoke.

What are our alternatives? asked Mette.

Mosely cleared his throat. If we cant find the doctors friend, then we accept the fight is lost. We set explosives round the entrance of the Refuge and entomb ourselves. There arent enough supplies to keep us all going, so instead of just the wounded and dying joining our patients in the dream chambers, we modify the healing parameters, climb in ourselves and go to sleep till were rescued.

Mette didnt look cheered. But people die in those things. And there arent enough for all of us.

Were working to fix the problem. Moselys moustache bristled. Im sure it can be solved successfully.

The others were less sure, it seemed; when Cass again requested volunteers, a number of hands sprung up. Webber kept his hands by his sides, not that Cass seemed to notice him anyway.

Suddenly the lights flickered and the almost imperceptible whine of the life systems spun down for a few seconds.

So soon after the last one? Salih stared up at the lights, as if willing them to return to their former brightness. Whats causing these power surges?

Everythings falling apart, sighed Mette. She raised her arm, too, and Cass slapped her heartily on the shoulder.

As with the fault in the dream chambers, said Mosely, the matters being investigated.

Shame the engineers have all karked it, muttered Salih.

Youd do better to be like Webber here, Mosely remarked, to a round of amused whispering. Webber is reading up on the subject, learning all he can. An example to all.

Of a loser, someone sniggered. Webber felt himself colouring.

Mosely gestured to the stranger. And anyway, now we have an expert. While were out looking for the girl, perhaps you, Webber, would direct our pioneering engineer and scientist to study our system flows?

V

THERE IS ANOTHER TALE OLMEC TOLD ME ABOUT A GREAT GODDESS WHO GAVE BIRTH

to a stone knife instead of a baby. She threw the knife from heaven and when it landed on the ground, 1,600 heroes rose up. They decided it would be nice to have servants and so asked the dog god Xolotl you remember, I told you about Xolotl to fetch the bone from the dead lands. It was these heroes that watered the bone with blood, and so made the first children. Then the children grew up and served the heroes as men and women.

Olmecs stories are all linked with each other, thats what I like about them. They must be linked in with life too, because I see the face of my mother when I think of this story. She gave birth to me, not a stone knife. But when they found me and took me away, and said that I would be bad one day, she used a knife on herself and she is dead now.

I was told she was bad, to hurt herself that way. Now I have been taken away and left alone here perhaps because of the things I did to hurt myself. I look at the sun and it does not burn the same. I can look at it for hours, and still see the owls.

The owls are servants of Hunhau the death god. They are portents of death. I have not seen Hunhau, and I dont want to. His body is a rotting corpse. Worms live in him. I wonder how he came to die; did he hurt himself or did others do it to him?

I asked Olmec, but he only shrugged. He said nothing hurts, once youre dead, and nothing makes you sad. But he seemed sad as he said it.

FIVE

THE OLD MANS SMUG SMILE HAD SNAGGED UNCOMFORTABLY ON THE IDEA OF

investigating the power losses. Since he must have risked a great deal to come here, Webber found his attitude baffling.

He led the way down the deserted corridors to the power room. I can only imagine you were badly informed as to our situation here.

Perhaps that is so, the old man admitted, hobbling along after him. The youngster mentioned FDs. What are they?

Future Deviants, of course. Webber frowned.

Ah, yes. But tell me…?

Gus Webber. Librarian. And you are?

The old man considered for a moment. Doctor will be quite sufficient, thank you.

Tell me, Gus Webber, Librarian: what does the term FD mean to you, and your situation here?

The Doctor was looking at him like he was the centre of the universe, and Webber found he was absurdly grateful for the interest. Well, to me, it just means that tomorrows criminal geniuses come and wipe snot on my pages instead of normal kids.

The Doctor looked at him expectantly. But the wider picture as you see it?

Webber blushed to think he was actually giving someone an opinion. Personally, I dont believe that just because a child carries certain genes linked to criminal behaviour, that means theyre necessarily predisposed to commit serious crimes in the future.

The Doctor snorted. A ludicrous notion.

It is. You know, its still quite legal to turn down gene-screening during pregnancy in some parts of the quadrant, but if the childs found to be

in breach of the Eugenics Code… Webber sighed, shook his head. All part of the glorious Earth crime crackdown.

Trying to shape the future? An unhealthy obsession, yes, unhealthy. He looked sternly at Webber. So some of these unfortunate children, they are placed here and offered refuge.

Offered a cure, Webber corrected him. Foetal gene therapy normally knocks out the really antisocial proteins, you know, but it can also actually cause mutations that create just as many problems. The lucky ones make it here.

The Doctor nodded. For experimentation.

Its done caringly, insisted Webber. This is the Refuge, not a death camp.

Perhaps it has become one. The Doctor looked at him almost smugly. Clearly youre of little perceived value to, ah, Earth Administration. Perhaps theyre content to let you be destroyed by your aggressors. It saves them the effort and expense of shutting you down and keeping you all quiet.

Webber stared at him. But Earth-A supported the creation of the Refuge.

The Doctor nodded. They just werent prepared to tolerate it in their locality, hmm?

They continued down the tiled passages. Normally this place would have been heaving with life, with medics and orderlies, patients on gurneys, chatter and phone chimes.

Hed been glad to be out of it, tucked away behind his desk in the hush of his library. Now the medics and orderlies were either slumped in the rec rooms or wounded in the chambers or out playing with guns. The Refuge had harboured a community of over three hundred adults and a thousand more children when Webber had first arrived.

Hed watched it dwindle to a skeletal personnel of a little over seventy terrified people, their charges packed away in cold storage. He missed the childrens liveliness, their cheek and whispers up and down the shelves and data racks. Now, when he wasnt blazing gunfire at foxes, he would watch pale-faced, red-eyed zombies drift through the library like ghosts, and feel like he was already dead.

This place was well funded at first, sighed Webber. VIPs shuttled in from the Industries Belt all the time. The Corporations thought new techniques or technology might develop from the work carried out here.

And did they? inquired the Doctor, languidly. Webber chewed his lip. The Corporation reps havent visited for a year now. Then they havent witnessed those creatures outside. What do you suppose they want?

All we can think is that they must want this planet for themselves, said Webber.

They want us gone. Theyll kill all of us if they can. And Earth wont lift an official finger to help.

The Doctor said nothing for the rest of the time it took to reach the power room. It was located near the heart of the Refuge, a vast vault of engines and fuel cells.

Great banks of computers lined one wall, like huge white cases crammed full of twinkling lights. Webber took great comfort from reading up on their workings, from the way the small print could transfigure them from objects of wonder into tools and registers.

The Doctor gazed about him appreciatively. He seemed visibly more relaxed as he lost himself in the workings of the room. Very quaint, he observed. You even have a rudimentary fault locator. Webber peered over his shoulder. Is it helpful?

It might be, if it were programmed to recognise a fluctuation in the general power flow as an actual fault. The parameters need adjusting. The Doctors hands stabbed accusingly at switches and tweaked big red dials. He had soon rectified the problem to his satisfaction. Where is section E9?

Dream chambers. Webber felt pinpricks of apprehension scatter up his spine. The faults in those? Clearly. I understand these devices have been malfunctioning recently?

Four people have died in them, but theres no sign of any mechanical fault.

And no-one thought to link such malfunctions with the power surges in the system flow? The Doctor chortled to himself.

Webber wasnt amused. Like Salih said. Our engineers have been killed

by the foxes.

The Doctor knitted his fingers together and looked firmly at Webber. I have done as your leader has asked. I have located the fault. Perhaps we may now retire and learn how the search for my companion is progressing, hmm?

Webber smiled awkwardly. Please, Doctor. Cant we try to repair the fault, ourselves? I understand the basic workings of the chambers. If we cant find your friend

You will find her.

But if we cant, well all have to use the chambers and

All of us? The Doctor looked at him, almost amused. You know, Im really not at liberty to interfere.

Webber frowned. You did come here to help us… didnt you?

The Doctor nodded quickly. Yes, yes… but to help by taking you away in my, er, space vessel to safety, not by meddling in these primitive systems.

Webber smoothed his hair nervously. Even so, while we wait for news… perhaps we could take a look together? Oh, very well. The old man sighed. I suppose time spent occupied is better than simply idling, hmm?

Her name was Susan. She knew it as soon as she woke up.

She frowned. It didnt feel quite right to her, like shoes that were just too small.

Names could be dangerous, they could give you away; she remembered someone very important had told her that, many times. But as Susan was the only name she could find in her head, she decided to hold on to it for now.

She was lying in a wide field, fringed with tall trees on every side. A brilliant sun eyed her nastily. The landscape seemed trapped beneath it, holding itself still and silent: scrubby hedges, long grass and spindly flowers, all fixed into place. No creature stirred, nothing prepared to give itself away on this hot, hot morning.

There was a tree close by. Its shadow on the bright green grass seemed almost solid, like she could bump into it. Susan smiled, and tried to do just that. It was icy in the trees shadow, like walking into a winter night.

As she looked around the quiet, vivid landscape, she realised with a start that she had no idea where she was or how she had got here.

She was suddenly unsettled by the silence. The sky was bleached orange, and no birds flew in it. But a delicate plume of what looked like smoke rose in a perfectly straight line from behind the distant trees ahead of her.

It was the only thing moving in this strange place besides her, and she knew she should take a closer look.

Susan, for that was her name, headed for the skinny pillar of smoke.

When she reached the trees that hemmed in the open spaces like soldiers, she was back in shadow and back in the shivering cold. She pressed through. The dense undergrowth clawed at her with chill fingers. There was a sudden clattering above. Susan looked up and saw a large white bird, with hooded eyes and a hooked beak, breaking for a zealously guarded patch of blue sky. It pushed through the canopy of twigs and leaves and disappeared.

The trees seemed to lean in to harry her as she pushed onwards, fighting the rising panic, quickening her step. The sound of twigs snapping, branches rustling, it was all muted, drowned out by her breathing, by her soft little gasps as she tried not to cry.

Then she cleared the forest boundary and saw the building.

It was a modestly sized building, shaped like a four-sided pyramid and fashioned from sandy coloured stone. The smoke shed seen was still rising in a narrow path from a hole in the square roof. It looked like a pencil scribble on the deep blue sky. There were no windows, and only one small metal hatch, incongruous in the stone.

As she stared at the house, Susan had the feeling that something was waiting inside.

Not waiting for her, but for something else. Something frightening.

She knocked on the hatch. No-one answered, so she knocked harder.

This time it slid smoothly aside, leaving a dark hole in the stone. She crouched down to peer inside. It was dark, but not so cold as the shadows had been.

Then something came out of the darkness.

A grey cat, with piercing green eyes. It opened its mouth repeatedly, but no sound came out. Apparently giving up, it turned, slinked its tail and vanished back into the darkness.

Susan went in after it.

VI

I REMEMBER MY MOTHER USED TO KISS ME ON THE HEAD. NOT IN THE WAY THAT

Baine would like to kiss Mentor Parm, the wet, squirming tongue way. But in a nice way, warm and dry and safe.

Mentor Parm would be sick if she knew what Baine thought about her. I put the images in her mind sometimes and she quivers and goes green and its very funny to watch.

She doesnt know its me doing it, and she feels rotten for thinking things like that, because she doesnt think its safe to love anyone. Thats without her even knowing the story of the wind god and the maiden in splinters.

When I think of them next, I will put lots of thoughts in their heads.

It is safe to love Olmec. He doesnt kiss, but he holds my hand when I am sad or unwell. I ask him to kiss me sometimes but he says he cant because he is not a mentor and that, anyway, lips are only there to stop your mouth fraying.

Hes right about that. It wasnt just a story.

So I kiss him secretly with my inside mouth, the safe way; not both ways, because I am only twelve. But I will kiss him when I am old enough, and in my head we both like it.

SIX

NO SIGN OF HER.

Cass nodded with exaggerated weariness. All right, Salih. Take the others and circle out another hundred metres.

This is ridiculous, sighed Salih. Look, I was wrong, okay? I never saw a girl.

Well, youd better see her soon, or its night-night for everyone, isnt it?

Shes dead. Salih spat in the sand. Who cares about her anyway?

Moselys orders, Cass reminded him. She lowered her voice. Me, I agree with you.

But hes the man in charge. Right?

Salih looked at her, moodily. Right now, he is. He moved off, signalling his squad to follow.

Squad. That was a joke. A bunch of nurses and teachers, happier wiping spit from a cripple than taking on the enemy. Sappy enough to accept a three-year occupancy in a place like the Refuge.

Cass had taken the only thing that anyone had been prepared to give her. But it was like she had come alive again, these last months, after the dreary year since the hearing had gone against her. Her Fringe CO had told her shed be discreetly reassigned to other duties after that, somewhere it didnt matter who she got killed.

Hed kept his threat with the guard posting here on Iwa: arsehole of the Pacific Rim and overlooked by all ever so discreetly. Old timers or time-servers might enjoy the work escorting the kids, calling curfew, taking them for physical exercise

but to her, it stank. Shed joined up to go career, not carer.

Not like Nurse Nip, Juniper Skinny-slit-eyes. Cass knew that Juniper fancied herself a real soldier as much as she fancied Mosely, but she was deluded in both. She had a lot to learn about combat like Mette, she hadnt even changed back into combat fatigues after the debrief,

and was prancing about in her civvies. Hopeless. And she had a lot to learn about backing the right side when it counted, too. Day after day, Cass had watched their Co-ordinator fall apart a little more, and this latest kick in the teeth from Earth had left him more rattled than shed ever seen him. It wouldnt be long and hed be bundled up jabbering in one of those black magic cabinets himself, rotting like the patients he was meant to dote on.

What are you smiling about?

She turned to see Juniper, waiting expectantly.

The thought of getting off this rock, said Cass. Report.

Ive reconnoitred the tunnels. No sign of the girl. The gun looked huge in Junipers yellow hands. She gripped it like she was frightened it would fall. Any luck out here?

No. Cass snorted. But then it was never very likely, was it? Shes dead, if she ever existed. We should get on with caving-in the entrances.

Co-ordinator Mosely wants us to keep searching, said Juniper. So we keep searching.

So we do. Cass smiled. Take two of your squad and chase up to the supply vessel.

The last one they downed? Juniper looked at her like she was mad. Boothes party was slaughtered in that gully. If the foxes whip up, theres nowhere to run. Its out of bounds.

You think the girl knows that? asked Cass reasonably. That ship is the only shelter outside the Refuge. If this girl exists, shes bound to head for it.

Juniper nodded, eyes burning with silent rage that she was trying not to show. Not giving Cass the satisfaction of seeing her fear.

But just that fleeting look was enough to satisfy Cass, as Juniper marched away.

Webber didnt know which rim of the quadrant the Doctor had bumbled out of, but he seemed distinctly confused about the achievements of humanity and its conquest of space. He asked questions and scoffed at the replies, or contested them fiercely. And even the most obvious of cultural references seemed to go over the old

mans silver head. He put it down to the trauma of the crash. And the old man was getting on, after all.

First, the Doctor had checked the throughfeed from the dream chambers to the main life systems, suspecting a faulty valve. But the circuitry was sound. The problem appeared to be at the remote source.

Now they stood bathed in the warm, dark glow of a dream chamber. Webber had fetched a data extract and fumbled his way through an explanation of the theory behind the technology, as he understood it. Now the Doctor was marrying garbled theory to practice.

So, once the subject is confined here and deprived of sensory input by the dream generators… The Doctor traced an electrode filament back to a glowing speck in the wall, nodding to himself all the way. Noninvasive surgery is carried out by the computers housed in this wall.

Correct, Webber murmured, so it says here. The Doctor tittered. A double helix. Thats your mighty DNA molecule is it? The building block of your genetic code. Whats so funny?

Did it ever occur to you that some species in the universe could probably map your genome in an afternoon, hmm? He shook his head, laughing heartily in disbelief.

While you persecute and prosecute your cases for doing this and that and think yourselves quite the scientists, Im sure.

Webber shrugged. Im not a scientist. No indeed, Im certain you are not. The Doctor looked at him critically. But you can manipulate the controls, naturally?

Of course. I suppose. In theory, definitely. Webber had watched Mentor Parm operate the controls fifty times on the training disk. And hed helped connect Mentor Parm up in one herself when it became clear her condition… Well, can you operate the controls or can you not? the Doctor insisted. Why?

The Doctor took a deep breath. I will need more than a clutch of tortuous explanations learned by rote if I am to understand the reason why these chambers are drawing more than their fair share of power, now, wont I?

Webber tried not to show he was stung. So what will you need, Doctor? Why, to experience the dream in these chambers for myself,

man!

But its not a real dream. Its just a simulated state that stops you being aware while the surgerys in process. Some of the procedures take years…

On some level the mind must remain aware, even if its fooled into thinking otherwise. The Doctor looked at him sourly. Even with the most animal of minds, the energy generated by the gene therapies will stimulate it on some level deep in the unconscious.

What has that got to do with the power surges? wondered Webber.

The Doctor shook his head in exasperation. According to the meters in the power room, there are currently over 170 human minds subjected to this simulated dream state, on a variety of surgical programmes. The Doctor rolled up his left sleeve and pressed an electrode filament against his wrist. They each draw power from a single source. Its possible the fluctuations are caused by nothing more than an unusually active mind creating a resonance, a vibration in the power flow if you like. To compensate, the chambers have to draw energy from the life systems.

Webber glumly watched him connect himself to the chamber apparatus. So what will you do?

Do you think you might recognise another power surge, hmm? the Doctor inquired testily. I shall aim to cause one from within the system. The mildest flexing of mental muscles He chuckled humourlessly. I should hate to wreck your delicate machinery.

As the Doctor linked himself with the chamber, plucking gossamer strands from the walls and attaching them to precise points on his neck, head and forearms, Webber surveyed the dark cubicle. The pale golden glow that pulsed through it was supposed to be comforting to young minds. He wondered how many crying children had been shut in here, how many experiments theyd been subjected to, and a familiar crackle of fear ran down his backbone.

The Doctor pressed a further filament to his temple. The wire seemed to hook itself into his aged skin.

Im almost ready, he announced. But first, you will please ensure the medical programme is not engaged. He indicated the small meter housed outside the chamber with a vague wave of his hand, until his wrist snagged on a connected filament, making him grimace.

Webber smothered a slightly vengeful smile. How long do you want in there?

A short while only should be sufficient.

Webber dragged across the smoky glass front of the cabinet. As it sealed shut, a display appeared in its mirrored surface. Webber peered at it, starting to sweat.

After some nervous deliberation, his clammy fingers beat a slow tattoo on the touch pad, as he disengaged the therapy sequencer while leaving the dream state parameters untouched.

Imagine yourself slipping under still, dark water, Mentor Parm had told the bairns, trying to soothe them as they hammered to be let out. The waters cold, but you can breathe. You can breathe, and all is well. Dont cry. Only when you stop crying will you sleep. Only then. And when you wake, everything will be better.

He imagined himself shut inside the chamber, clawing at the cold glass, suffocating in the darkness.

Dont cry. You can breathe and all is well.

He would give the Doctor five minutes in the chamber, then wake him.

When you wake, everything will be better.

No-one had told Mentor Parm anything when her brainless body was heaved inside the chamber and put to the cold, smothering sleep.

What dreams would she be having now?

The chilly seconds trudged by.

VII

HE OPENED HIS EYES, BUT IT WAS DARK. HE PUT HIS HANDS TO HIS CHEST, FELT HIS WRISTS.

The cords and filaments that tied him to the computer systems were gone. He couldnt sense any interface in the blackness, nothing for him to engage with. He reached out for the walls of the chamber, but they were no longer there. Had someone attacked him while he slept and taken him away? These animals who aped his form were like abandoned children, scared and senseless. Perhaps they had not believed his lies after all, and incarcerated him. The thought was unpalatable.

He was in a bigger place than the chamber, a room with no windows. The floor felt solid beneath him, like stone. He took an uncertain step forwards and a portal opened in the wall before him. Dirty light spilled through it. Not wishing to waste his time in the dark, he stepped through.

Something wasnt right.

He was in a big room. The light filtered dimly through a single boarded-up window.

The walls, floor and ceiling were all tiled in lustreless grey. And there were two more of the human animals, one in a bed, one in a chair, together in the far corner, still as dummies.

He waited for them to react. They didnt.

Such meagre minds and feeble dispositions. For a disquieting moment he had taken these humans for his enemies, come to punish. But this was not one of their traps, and his wanderings would not end so quickly, hed make sure of that.

Who are you? he asked sternly. Where is this place?

The weighty beast in the chair and the thing propped up in the bed didnt answer him.

Hed heard folklore among his people of creatures who wore the skins of men. He even fancied hed heard mention of this planet Earth

before. It might be a good place to hide, he supposed. Humans were gullible, easily tamed and tricked, and the physical similarities were quite unpleasant. Yes, one could hide there very well for a time, if needed.

He raised his voice. Can you hear me? Go away, said the animal in the chair. It was a female, a weighty woman with a throaty voice. You mustnt be here. Quite clearly, I am. He turned to the bed-ridden creature. But where is here, hmm? He walked towards them. It was a male in the bed, with sandy-grey hair. The beast pulled the covers up over his chin as if afraid.

The woman held a piece of fabric to her face; he could only discern her large, brown eyes and the curly crown of dark hair that hung over them. We dont know, she hissed. But theyve not found us yet. They mustnt find us.

To whom are you referring? he inquired, losing patience. Listen to me. I was inside one of your so-called dream chambers, correcting a fault, when… He trailed off. Of course, this was a kind of hospital. These must be patients.

There are monsters here, the woman said.

The male moaned and nodded. The woman lowered her eyes. He cant speak any more,

she said huskily. Soon, my voice will be gone too. Then we wont be able to warn the monsters away.

I need to speak to someone in authority. He strode over to the boarded-up window.

I do not belong here with you; your minds have clearly been affected by what passes for surgery here. I must find my young granddaughter.

A girl? The woman shifted her bulk in the wooden chair. We knew a girl. His eyes narrowed. Youve seen her? Where? Not here. Weve not seen her for a long time.

Her voice seemed

speckled with dropouts, like a poor recording. There are only monsters here now.

They look like cats… We used to scare them, but they creep back now.

They have the run of it here…

He didnt listen to her babble, but peered instead into the light through a crack in the boards covering the window. It was bright outside. Fields of yellow and green carpeted the landscape, lush and silent.

And we cant shout to scare them away, said the woman.

He looked back at her, and now saw that the lower part of her face had been eaten away. Instead of a mouth, there was just a blackened, bloody mess.

He felt strangely dizzy, terribly tired. And suddenly he was outside the building, standing in wanton sunshine. He was furious to realise that this place was an illusion. Just a dream.

Tall trees stood like sentries before him. Behind him was a door. The face of a broad-nosed, full-lipped human was carved crudely into it. It seemed to mock him.

Concentrate, he told himself. Find the interface.

Nothing. Just a sick feeling.

The conduits are so primitive my mind cannot locate them, he told himself. But he was furious at feeling so helpless.

Suddenly there was movement at his feet.

A naked baby was crawling towards him from out of the undergrowth.

He stumbled backwards, hit the wooden door. The carving of the face pressed into his back, pushed him away. Collecting himself, he peered up at the building behind him.

Above the door, the stone wall stretched up to a single boarded window, high above.

Was this cub the offspring of the two humans up in the wide, dark room? Was this the girl the woman had mentioned?

The baby crawled silently, determinedly over the grass. Soon it would be at his feet.

But a faster movement tugged his notice. Leafy bushes rustled nearby. A staring yellow eye, glimpsed through the cover of leaves, leered at him. The head of some massive, fanged wild animal began to push

through the foliage.

The sky grew darker.

SEVEN

SUSAN FOLLOWED THE CAT THROUGH THE DARK CHAMBERS OF THE STONE PYRAMID.

A grey ghost, it led her up and down flights of crumbling steps, through doorways into wide open rooms, empty and bare, and out again through little conduits that seemed to close in around her as she braved them. As in the Ship, her home, there seemed no correlation between the inside and outside of this building.

The cat stopped at last outside a small white rectangle built into a peeling wall. It was a primitive door, made of wood. There was something carved into it; a face, with a broad nose and a high forehead. The lips were full and smiling.

Susan pulled on the handle, which was made of some tarnished metal, and the door opened onto another gloomy little room.

The cat trotted inside, but a foul, rank smell made Susan almost gag. It was the first thing shed smelled since she found herself here. The cats tail curled into a crook, seemed to beckon her inside.

She stuck her head through the doorway. The square room had a grimy yellow floor, pitted with gouges and scratches and littered with droppings. There was a tall cupboard standing against the far wall. Nothing else.

Susan came in on all fours like the cat. Nothing moved. The floor seemed sweaty, springy. The tang of it caught in her nostrils. The cat watched her with lazy yellow eyes.

Then the cupboard door swung quickly open.

A girl lived in the cupboard.

She looked at Susan with bright blue eyes, and tried to smile.

But she had no lips. The dark gash of her mouth was frayed and bloodied.

Susan screamed, closed her eyes. But it seemed suddenly that the sun was inside the room with her, blinding white, and she couldnt shut it

out.

I like to stare into the sun, eyes wide.

Susan heard the voice in her mind. For a moment she pictured herself flying down a long, dark tunnel, littered with doorways, fashioned from dark and smoky glass. Then snatched into brightness, held tightly by the clumsy grip of a child. A child hungry to tell her story.

It burns incredible colours into my head, great shifting continents of them that blot out all else.

The cat rubbed its head against her chin. Susan crawled for the cupboard and was happy to be shut inside. The girls voice speaking in her head. The steady drip-drip of blood from the girls raw mouth hitting her hand.

This place.

Its for people who mustnt be listened to. People who spoke once too often when they were warned what they could expect. People who used up second chances and third chances and all the rest. Now theyre shut up for good.

Or they should be. They never did find my smart mouth, though. Its mine for keeps.

They try to speak to it in codes. Grownups use codes to make them seem clever.

But they know only letters: GTAC.

I know words, and I make pictures with them.

Olmec told me once about some not-so-nice animals that are part like a man, and part like a cat. Jaguar men. Always snarling. They never speak, but they can do things to people. They arent natural they are supernatural. Nature cannot explain them, like it cannot explain me. But I was quickly caught, while no-one can catch jaguar men, they are too fast. They can see you, but you cant see them.

They are the jailers here, in this place where people come to have their voices chopped out of them. They are friends of Hunhau the death god. They prowl ahead of him, watched over by his familiar, the owl.

Everyone is always watching someone else here. Chloe, my cat, is watched by me. I am watched by the were-jaguars. The owls watch the were-jaguars, and Hunhau watches the owls. Hunhau is watched by the sun and the moon.

When they rise in me I see him too.

I see him now, led to a house on the forests edge. It is night-time, but warm and close. The tall trees, sentries for centuries, sigh and fall aside as the creatures, half big cat, half man, steal in from the dead land and circle the house.

Two people are inside.

They listen out for the snapping of a stick, and wonder if their necks are next. They hear the scrape of leaves against huge, furry bodies pushing through foliage, and feel nails on their skin. The growl of these supernatural animals slips ragged through their single dirty window like a dying breath. An owls wings clatter like panic.

Slowly, the monsters gather at the door. They crowd outside it. The two people are scared. Especially the woman.

Whoever would think that Mentor Parm could be so scared? When youre outside looking in like the things downstairs that are creeping inside even now its not scary.

Its interesting. Its absorbing. Like youre solving a puzzle.

But Parm didnt want to solve puzzles when she came here. She wanted to be left alone. Like Mentor Baine.

Mentor Baine doesnt understand puzzles anymore. He lost his senses outside. He still stares at Parm, but he cant remember why he wanted to. It doesnt connect. Like his big head doesnt connect to his neck anymore, it just lolls about on his chest, broken clear away.

The man-cats move aside. You-know-who is coming.

Baine sees Mentor Parm is scared, and knows he should be, too. He pulls the sheets further over his rolling head and hides beneath the covers.

There are footsteps on the stairs. Heavy steps, slow and steady. Hunhau, the death god, the rotting corpse that comes for you slowly on stiff, bony legs, is getting closer.

Mentor Parm wants to scream, but its not allowed.

No-one wants to hear that dreadful racket you make. Go to sleep and stop crying.

Anyway, after too long in here, her mouth is as frayed as mine and her jaw is black with rot. She opens it too wide, and her chin falls right off. It lands on the antiseptic tiles like a mouldy old fruit. She is shut up now, shut up, shut up.

Theres no blood, because I have heard Olmec say she is a bloodless bitch.

The two of them are funny to watch. Parm with her broken head, Baine twitching in his bed. His face is rotting too. It looks like maggots have eaten his lips and burrowed into his gums and started pushing out his teeth. As the creeping footsteps get closer, he gnashes his teeth together, like I did sometimes when the things they did hurt too much. He gave me leather to bite on. He can only bite on his own teeth, and they crumble like chalk. They leave a taste like sick on his rotten old tongue.

The door opens. Hunhau is here. His face is long and grey. His body is like chewing gum stretched over sticks. Worms peep out from his skin beneath his tatty clothes.

The owls are clawing and tearing at the boards over the windows. Parm cowers behind her chair, but she is too big and fat. Baine falls out of bed and tries to hide beneath it. Its a big room, but theres nowhere else to go. Its so big, it takes Hunhau whole minutes to cross it, limping towards them with a big smile. The owls break through the flimsy glass. They cut their wings on it, but it doesnt hurt, and they spray blood all round the room as they flap about. They drag away the chair with their big hooked beaks. They tug away the bed.

Its raining blood on Baines stupid fat head.

Parms bulging eyes shut tight with dread.

And tonight, Hunhau will be well fed.

VIII

YOURE SCARED, SUSAN. CRUSHED UP CLOSE IN THE CUPBOARD, I CAN FEEL YOUR HEART

beating, two beats for every one of mine.

You shouldnt be scared. Those people were horrid, and they were mean to me. Even here, when we were all in the same dirty mess, they were horrible. They didnt want to be with me, didnt want to help with the plan. Just wanted to sleep. To be alone.

Im bored with being alone, so Im glad you are here. Im lonely because I cant find Olmec. Hes still out looking for his animals, I suppose. Chloe is one of his cats, did you know? Shes his favourite, and mine too. She is skinny and grey, like me. Skinny and grey from hiding all this time. She used to purr, but she cant any more, not here.

The other children liked the plumper cats, the cuddly ones. I cant find any of them.

I suppose theyve had their voices taken away already.

You are different from the others. Youre like me: you have a smart mouth, I heard you screaming with it when you were running away from the monsters. And you dont belong anywhere. We have lots in common.

Your name is Susan. That was my mothers name. She is dead now and doesnt need it, so I gave it to you.

My name is Jill.

I need you to help me bring Olmec.

He taught me about the animals, and he taught me about the gods and the demons and their familiars. I see them all so clearly, but I cant stop them. Theyve killed everyone there is to kill around here. If they want to kill us, I cant stop them.

Every day it gets darker sooner and, Susan, I cant stop the monsters.

EIGHT

JUNIPER HAD PROMISED HERSELF SHED NEVER RETURN HERE.

The wreck of the supply craft lay beached on a rocky plain, blackened and skeletal like the rib cage of some giant animal. The automated vessels were built to rust away quickly, to avoid their target area becoming a graveyard of spaceships. The narrow channel she walked along now was the only passable route to the plain.

It was littered with human bones, left to yellow in the insipid sunlight.

The monsters had soon realised that the monthly supply vessel despatched from one of the distant resource stations on the quadrants edge brought the humans scurrying out like ants to a picnic. Early in the war, when Mosely had declared the foxes were few in number, Boothes reclamation team had come here as usual to pick out what was useful from the haphazard haul. The creatures had lain in wait and simply blown down into the gully, reforming in a blizzard of black skin and blocking the teams path.

She remembered Boothes terrified screams crackling through the speakers in Moselys office, the zinging of laser fire and the shrieks of the monsters as they attacked.

Shed been alone with Mosely at the time, just talking and enjoying the intimacy. It had been the third time theyd sat talking alone there, off-duty, and the thrill of it still made her stomach buzz. There were rules and regulations for staff in a long-term service occupancy, of course; relationships were strictly forbidden. Which was why everyone was having them, anywhere you could turn out a light. Except her, and maybe Webber, and Mosely, of course, who always practised what he preached. But who, nevertheless, seemed to be paying her more attention than he did the rest of the women.

In those seconds before the screams, hed been looking at her like maybe he wanted to practise something else. Then that little light on his desk had shone spitefully into his attention. And then…

Mosley had never looked at anyone in the same way after that. And they had never been alone in his office again. He would heave mechanical smiles onto his face as she accidentally passed him, but his eyes never saw her. Juniper knew that if she died today, if she was torn apart, he wouldnt feel any more pain than he would for anyone

else in his charge.

The truly maddening thing was that she couldnt help wanting him all the more as a result.

When three more men had died, Juniper had joined the fighting ranks. Sector Head.

Without the discipline that the role demanded, she would have fallen apart by now.

Now the children were put to rest along with her dreams of Mosely and, with normal duties suspended, she couldnt go on just cowering in the Refuge, nursing those who were dying for her sake. Fear was bred in ignorance, Mosely had always said. Fear came from not understanding your enemy. By participating in the defence of their Refuge, by witnessing attack after attack, Juniper had hoped to understand them. And she did, for better or worse.

They were predators. Killers. They wouldnt give up until she, and everyone else, was dead.

Now, with every whisper of the wet wind, every scuff of the pebbles underfoot, her trembling legs wanted to buckle, to leave her sprawling in the dirt. She knew her squad felt the fear too. The air seemed charged with it.

Thane came up beside her. He was a dumpy little man, ex-military. She couldnt imagine anyone calling him sergeant.

We should go back, he said.

if we find that girl, we can get out of this hole, Juniper reminded him.

I think we should go back, too, Mette agreed. Theyll come and kill us if we keep going.

Juniper stopped marching, turned to face her squad. Do you all feel the same?

Mette, Thane and the other two nodded.

All right, said Juniper. Well tell Cass we went as far as the wreck, okay? No one must know we didnt really…

Her voice dried as she caught motion over their shoulders. Flakes of black snow were gusting together in a tight vortex.

She opened her mouth to give an order, but a traitorous scream slipped out first.

The ground exploded in front of Thane, and he shrieked as the alien formed; its dark, bloated body almost filling the gully. There was another explosion behind her, as another of the creatures piled up from spiralling scraps of flesh.

Open fire, croaked Juniper, but her squad were already blasting lasers all around her.

Webber regarded the unblinking red eye of the recall button. Time yet? No, the Doctor couldnt have been in there for more than two minutes. Webber double-checked his watch anyway.

In the door display of the Doctors dream chamber, small icons flickered and glowed, burning like fever. Then, as Webber watched uneasily, they blinked off.

A second later, the main lights went out more spectacularly, exploding over Webbers head in a spout of sparks. He yelled in alarm. Was this the Doctors doing, the promised power surge? Or some kind of attack? He cowered back from the Doctors door, waited for the emergency lights to kick in.

Whats happening? Moselys voice carried coldly to him through the darkness.

The other lights in the corridor flickered on as Mosely approached him. It wasnt often their Co-ordinator ventured out of his offices these days. He looked edgy and pale, his moustache quivering beneath his long nose. That was the biggest surge yet.

Things are meant to be getting better, not worse. Wheres the Doctor?

He looked like he might cry, and Webber endured a moment of awful clarity. Mosely hadnt so much pinned his hopes on the Doctor as skewered him with them.

Weve traced the fault back to here, said Webber as he smoothed a hand over the thin, matted hair on his sweaty pate. Were testing out the dream chamber now.

The Doctors in there? Mosely demanded, studying the flickering signatures on the health display. For gods sake, man, look at his signs! Hes dying!

Webber stared in horror at the display. I I thought it was just symptomatic of the power failure

Mosely wasnt listening. He tore open the door, and the Doctor tumbled out and into his arms. His light uniform was blackened with sweat, and broken filaments trailed from his head and wrists like cobwebs.

Help me with him, gasped Mosely, and Webber took the Doctors arm, eased him down onto the floor. He mustnt die. He can get us away from here, he mustnt die.

The Doctors face was ashen. When his eyes snapped open, for a moment they looked as black and alien as those of the creatures lurking outside. Webber recoiled, instinctively.

The Doctor blinked, shook his head, and saw Mosely before him. Wheres my companion? he inquired, as if nothing were amiss. Surely you have found her by now?

Not a trace of her.

You must redouble your efforts, the Doctor insisted.

Mosely nodded brusquely. What happened in there?

In there? Oh, the problem is simple, muttered the Doctor, struggling to his feet.

One of your patients is causing trouble in his sleep, so to speak.

Impossible, said Mosely flatly. Patients are kept strictly controlled and sedated while in the chambers, via an interface with the computer.

The interface has been swamped, the Doctor retorted. A pronounced telepathic mind is more than a match for your surgical programmes. He tapped his finger against his lips, frowning in concentration. And rather than endure a digital impression of peaceful sleep, this telepath has interfaced with the central datacore and created a world of his own within the induced dream state.

Webber nodded. I see.

Mosely seemed less sure. You honestly believe this rogue elements activities are able to affect the main life systems?

The Doctor looked like he was going to explode, so Webber quickly

explained their findings in the power room.

I take it you do have telepaths undergoing the Doctor gave Mosely a chilly smile, treatment here, hmm?

Low-level abilities only, said Mosely. No-one outstanding. The Corporations poured a good deal of money into exploring ways of activating and deactivating the telepathic gene. He frowned. The telepaths have been the toughest nuts to crack.

Very resistant to the therapies.

Tell me, why should a telepath be any more inclined to criminality than the Doctor looked at Webber now, a merely average human?

Too much intelligence the wrong sort of intelligence creates disruption. Mosely spoke as if reciting from an Earth-A pamphlet, which maybe he was. Innate abilities such as telepathy can foster feelings of superiority in subjects, leading in turn to manipulation of others for selfish purposes and, in seventeen per cent of cases, subversive or criminal activities.

The Doctor smiled. And yet youre confident that your corporate sponsors would employ a controllable brand of telepathy to enhance life in this backward century, hmm?

I have confidence in the Refuge… Mosely looked at the floor, shiftily. And I have confidence in the abilities of my staff in this undertaking. I have always maintained that with appropriate funding we can do great work here.

Someone is doing great work to confound you, Co-ordinator, and their funding comes cheaply from your power supply. The Doctor plucked a gossamer thread from his wrist and looked beadily at Webber and Mosely in turn, like an owl selecting a mouse to devour. Now, tell me. Do you happen to keep a register of the unfortunates youve consigned to this somewhat cramped fate, hmm?

Mosely sealed the doors to his office. They were fashioned from dense plastic, and meant to be very secure, and hed never really taken in how flimsy-thin they looked before. It was as if routine operation had worn them down. He could sympathise. His facile mouth opened and closed just as obligingly as they, whenever requested, and his words wore thin also. They were nothings, flicked by his tongue into dead space.

When you sympathise with your doors more than the staff in your employ, its time to get out, he told himself. More nothings. A short, hysterical laugh ripped from his lips.

As Co-ordinator, the responsibility for deciding who among those in your care will survive is your own, the video woman had told him, as she sat safe and smug in Earth Administration.

His meeting with the Doctor had been unsettling. A fault in three or four of the dream chambers he could accept, but if the problem was more widely spread, with the actual fount of the power supply affected…

Of course it was. That much was obvious, and a few months ago he would have recognised the fact in minutes. Instead, because the dream chambers were the best and only chance for survival their beleaguered community possessed, hed refused to accept the possibility that they could fail. As if his opinion mattered. As if it could change anything at all.

I have confidence in the Refuge, he had said, and in the abilities of my staff in this great undertaking.

But none at all left in himself.

The lights on his desk were dark. Each one was a man or woman braver than he, but their little burnt-out suns no longer warmed him. He pictured them now, outside in the washy light, searching the rocky plains for the last remaining hope left to them all: a half-glimpsed girl who was somehow supposed to whisk them away from this madness.

What was less likely? Finding the girl, or the Doctor succeeding in rooting out a rogue telepath from the dream chambers so that they could all crawl away into the dark and hide?

A single light on his desk flickered on, like a nervous thought. Mosely stared at it, felt his heart shudder.

who among those in your care will survive

The girl had been found. Still alive. There was a way out. He could hold on.

Mosely flicked the switch beneath the light.

Junipers scream barked out from the speakers. It crash-echoed round

the flimsy walls, the worn-out doors, the well-paced floors, flayed the sense from his head.

Shut up! he shouted at the winking light as the shrieking went on, grew louder and louder in his ears. Shut up!

Juniper was smiling anxiously up at him, her young, smooth face full of nerves.

Shut up!

No-one would know if you kissed her. No-one would know if you reached out your hand and

Shut up! He smashed his fist into the switch beneath the light. The noise stopped, but the echoes carried on. His hand was bleeding, he couldnt see the cut, couldnt see the point of any of this, and Juniper was reaching out for him and he was knocking her back with his bloody hand, but it was her blood. He had too much blood on his hands, and he couldnt feel anything now.

He was alone with the screaming in a silent room.

NINE

IT WAS NICKNAMED THE MORGUE, JUST AS THE REAL MORGUE WAS NICKNAMED THE

meat locker. No bodies were kept sealed within its cold grey walls. It was a repository of every individuals life records: medical histories, biodata profiles, experiment transcripts, all were held secure here.

Before retiring to his offices to keep tabs on the search for the girl, Mosely had given Webber priority access codes to get the information they needed. Priority access! Webber felt a small glow of excitement as the door to the morgue slid open at his command.

The excitement soon dissipated in the cold atmosphere within. The room had to be kept at a low, stable temperature, he remembered reading, as the computer servers were housed here, too.

The Doctor quickly identified the main information terminal. Webber inputted his shiny new codes and attempted to call up a file, but his fingers, numb with cold, stabbed clumsily at the keyboard. The Doctor perched on a chair and provided an accompaniment of impatient clicks and mutters.

These are the most recent entrants to the chambers, said Webber. The monitor scrolled through the images of several tear-stained children. Really, Webber, is there no way to cross-reference against telepathy who wait! The Doctor hopped down from his chair. Hold that file. Thats Mentor Parm, Webber looked at the chubby, brown-eyed

woman, curly hair in disarray, thin lips pressed together in a posed smile.

I saw her, said the Doctor. In the dreamscape.

Shes been in two weeks… Webber tailed off, stared at the single word highlighted at the bottom of the screen. Deceased? But thats impossible, she was stable in the chamber.

Time of death?

Vital signs snagged thirty minutes ago. Webber felt a tickle of nerves

along his backbone. About the time of the power surge. He crossed the room to the call grille. I have to report this to Mosely.

Not yet, said the Doctor, beckoning him back impatiently.

But the womans dead, Webber protested.

Then nothing can be done for her. The Doctor was staring at the data on the screen.

Whereas Co-ordinator Mosely is a busy man. It wouldnt do to distract him further from his search for my companion. It wouldnt do at all.

Webber crossed back reluctantly, rubbing his chilly arms. Its very irregular, he grumbled.

The Doctor ignored him. This Parm woman… her mouth had rotted away. Yet her reported injuries dont suggest… He smiled. Of course. This dream world has been created illicitly, and we know it requires enormous power to keep it stable. The datacore is trying to purge itself of those minds within it. The removal of the mouth is visually symbolic of that.

The systems trying to gag them, you mean?

So it would seem. She seemed confused and unhappy, trapped there with another man.

He steepled his fingers. She said there were monsters nearby.

Im surprised she could say anything at all. She took a lot of shrapnel to the head and torso during an attack. Webber shuddered. Left her a vegetable.

But dont you see? the Doctor gripped the lapels of his uniform. Our telepath has created a world for himself. Others in the dream state shouldnt be able to access it.

Webber was puzzled. You did.

My mind has a certain affinity with matters telepathic, the Doctor said disingenuously. But you people… No. You could not simply wander inside that private world. You could only be invited there. He paused. Or dragged there. Yes, the mind of our telepath has reached out, possibly to those people closest to him, and reeled in their sleeping minds.

So its simple, then, said Webber. We find the neighbouring cubicle to Parm and

The Doctor looked at him scornfully. I wasnt talking about physical proximity. I meant someone the telepath responded to, cared about, wanted there for comfort.

The kids didnt like Mentor Parm, if their doodles were anything to go by. I believe she wasnt always that gentle. With anyone. Webber sighed. From what I hear, there arent many who miss her.

That man I saw in the room with her, recalled the Doctor. We must identify him. He couldnt speak, but that could be again symptomatic of their presence being censored by the systems…

Did he have any distinguishing marks?

You all look so similar, the Doctor complained. Noticing Webbers look of surprise, he checked himself. That is to say, I couldnt see him clearly.

Webber clicked through a few more images.

That is him. The Doctor nodded in satisfaction.

Chief Mentor Baine? He was the head of the gene evisceration project… Webber swallowed hard. I dont understand this. It says hes dead too, but thereve been no alarms, no

What was his state of health when placed in the chamber?

I have to tell Mosely

The state of his health, man, thundered the Doctor.

His neck was broken by one of the foxes. Spinal nerve was almost severed, he was undergoing extreme surgery, a three-month programme. Webber took a deep breath, and let it out slowly. When the kids found out what had happened, they made more racket than the foxes at sleep time.

The Doctor waved his hand impatiently. A much loved member of your staff, Im sure.

No. They were celebrating. They hated his guts.

I wonder, then, said the Doctor, staring into space. Bringing people in

not for comfort, but for revenge.

Webber bit his lip. But how can this kid kill them in a dream? Kill them for real, I mean?

The child has borrowed power from the datacore to generate this curious world, and can apparently wield it to order. In this case, to perform a quite singular evisceration of his own.

The cold that Webber felt went way beyond the controlled chill of the morgue. The hiss and chatter of the servers lining the wall seemed to him suddenly like soft, ceaseless laughter.

There are almost two hundred children in storage in the chambers, breathed Webber.

They were put to sleep as soon as rationing began.

The Doctor pursed his lips, considered. You know, Webber, there was something else I saw in the dream world.

The thing that killed Parm and ?

No, no, no. There was some sort of wild animal construct in there, but most likely it was a simple personification of the childs anger. No, this was a… a very small child, unable to walk. It was unclothed and crawling through the undergrowth…

Unsupervised? Webber frowned. We do have some babies here, but theyre not real.

Theyre mindless, bred for stem cells and genehybridisation. But the children dont know about them. Too upsetting. You know, to kids.

Quite, muttered the Doctor. Well, it would seem our telepath knows about them now, and has indeed found the discovery too upsetting to allow already-hated figures of authority to go unpunished.

He smiled at Webber, quite untroubled; the puzzle now solved, the challenge to his intelligence swiftly quashed.

Webber felt suddenly uneasy in the Doctors cold company. I have to tell Mosely about the deaths, he said. And youd better explain all this to him.

Had I indeed? grumbled the Doctor.

And more than that, Webber said, in his most vengeful librarian voice, youre going to tell all of us what youre going to do now to make things right.

Juniper fell back against the cold rock of the gully wall. Her left side burnt, and was drenched with blood. She wished shed changed back into her red combat fatigues: they might have hidden how bad the wound seemed.

She tried to tell herself that most of the blood was Thanes. Hed been shooting bolt after bolt into one of the foxes until it gripped his arm and simply tugged it off at the shoulder. Hed collapsed screaming, spurting blood, still firing wildly as he writhed in a slick of crimson mud. One of the bolts had caught Juniper in the hip as shed called in to Mosely. Shed screamed and screamed, and Mosely had remained silent. No last words, no final benediction.

The pain of it all had almost blinded her to her predicament. She was defenceless; her gun had been stamped on, and lay broken in a thick puddle of Thanes blood. Her squad had been wiped out, save for Mette, whod lost her gun while trying to scrabble out of the gully. Her grey teachers uniform was covered in mud and dark stains in suspect places. The two women huddled together now, Mette biting her broken nails and sucking her raw fingertips.

And now the monsters stood in a ring around them, stared down at them with oily black eyes. Their hunched, muscular bodies heaved and wheezed and shuddered for breath, their dribbling jaws twitched in anticipation.

Juniper stared up at them. They stared back at her. She wished they would just end it now, but they seemed to be enjoying the moment too much, whispering and grunting to each other.

Come on, then! yelled Juniper, too pained and too scared to endure this waiting any longer.

Dont! hissed Mette, panic-stricken. They might

The words strangled in her throat as one of the foxes towered over them, opened its jaws and shouted something back, a bad impersonation of Junipers yell.

Juniper was incredulous. Its making fun of me!

The creature opened its mouth again, bent over to inspect them more

closely. Juniper heard Mette moan with fear and held her tightly as the huge jaws sagged open still further, as if the creature wanted to bite off both their heads in one go.

But as a new roar began to build in the things throat, its fellows started to squall and shake like beaten babies. The foxs jaws snapped shut, seconds away from Junipers face. It staggered back drunkenly, screamed itself, as its form blurred and buzzed.

Mette stirred at her side. Theyre breaking up!

Time for bed! whooped Juniper. We mustve exhausted them more than we thought.

Shed never seen the break-up so close before. The foxes bodies seemed to caramelise in the air, before sheeting away and blowing clear in a gusting wind. The smell was disgusting, all septic and shitty, as the creatures pieces vanished away back to whatever nightmare place had spawned them.

Why didnt they finish us while they could? wondered Mette.

Juniper shrugged. Maybe itll teach them not to gloat in future. Leaning heavily on the older woman, gritting her teeth with the pain, she was able to get to her feet.

Mosely should know about this. Mette tapped Junipers wrist communicator. It cant be working, muttered Juniper. Tried it earlier and he didnt respond.

Looks fine to me. Maybe his teeth were chattering too hard.

Juniper took some stumbling steps with Mettes help. Put yourself in his place before you judge him.

Mette threw her a sideways glance. Of course, I dont know him as well as you, do I?

Juniper couldnt answer. It was pain from her hip that was making the tears well up.

Come on, Mette said, a touch more kindly. Well go back to Cass. She can stretcher you back to the Refuge.

And the search goes on, muttered Juniper.

Not for me. I just want to sleep. Mette coughed up a laugh. So much

for near death experiences leaving the victims euphoric. All I want is to lock myself away in a dream chamber and sleep till its all over.

They struggled away from the carnage in the gully. The suns fat disc hung low and stretched strange shadows over Iwas barren surface, and a thought occurred to Juniper. What if you have bad dreams?

Better to be in a nightmare you can wake up from, said Mette firmly.

IX

WHAT WAS THAT?

Susan could hear a stealthy scratching noise coming from outside the cupboard. She gripped Jills hand, and the little girl squeezed back. Their fingers were slick with the blood dripping down from her gory mouth. Their eyes met. Jills were wide and sad, like Susans had been at home, before she left. The sadness of the dispossessed.

Its all right, Jill whispered in Susans head. Its part of the plan. Open the cupboard door. Very, very slowly.

Scared without really knowing why, Susan gently nudged open the cupboard door a crack. Chloe the cat slinked inside, but she hadnt been the one that had made the scratching noises. It had sounded like many claws, working together.

Susan peered out at the gloomy room beyond, and caught her breath.

In the same low doorway through which shed entered sat a big fat rat. It scampered inside, soon followed by two white mice and another rat, slimy and scabrous. The rodents began to pick at the mouldering floor as if it was quite delicious.

Its made of cheese, you see, said Jill.

Susan looked at her, bemused. Why?

Jill laughed out loud, releasing a gout of blood from her ragged mouth. The blood splashed on the cupboards wooden floor, but she paid it no heed. I told you. Its part of the plan.

More rats crept in, and more mice, squeaking and coiling around each other as they hunted out space on the floor, stabbing at the tough cheese with their sharp incisors, feasting on its stink. Susan looked away in disgust.

Why do you want those filthy things in here? she hissed.

Youll see, Jill said, sucking on a lock of her bloodied blonde hair. Because you are Tres Ojos, like me.

Susan turned back to the chink in the door. There was something else in the doorway.

A grizzled old cat. It was white as a sheet and wiry and thin as a whisker. Its head looked too big for its skinny neck, but its blue eyes gleamed as they took in the feast of mice and rats cavorting on the cheese floor. Behind it, another cat stole into the room, ghostly and dark with sunken blue eyes just the same.

They were Jills eyes.

Then over the heads of both cats jumped another. Susan cried out as the marmalade beast shot from the shadows, claws out and jaws open wide, orange and stripy and hungry.

At the sound of her voice, the cats vanished. The rats and mice scattered.

Jill gripped Susan by the throat, pushed her up against the dark wall of the cupboard. You fool! she rasped, her wide mouth tearing into her cheeks a little further. You scared them away and spoilt everything. Everything. You dont use real voices here, because they can hear.

Susan squirmed in Jills bloody grip. Who are they? she said with her mind.

The jailers. The owls. Hunhau, the death god. Jill slackened her grip. Youd better get used to using your smart mouth, Susan. Soon its going to be the only one youve got.

Susan pressed her fingertips to her lips. They were coming off in strips.

Jill giggled softly as Susan stared in horror at the mess in her hands.

They shut you up, Susan. The voice was small and frightened in her head. Its just what they do.

TEN

THE LIGHT IN MOSELYS OFFICE BRIGHTENED TO PAINFUL INTENSITY, LIKE THEY WERE

screaming as well. Then, slowly, begrudgingly, they dimmed back down to their usual level.

Mosely looked up from his couch, his lips flecked with sticky white, his eyes crusty with dried tears. Hed been asleep. The lights on his desk intercom were dark, extinguished. He remembered

The flood of recent memories snagged on Junipers scream. He clenched his fists, fought against fresh tears, though he didnt really know why. What else was there to do?

A light glowed on the intercom, and at once his remaining strength ebbed away, like the lights after the power surge.

He couldnt remember whose light it was. And he didnt want to hear more screams. He really didnt. Perhaps the light would go out.

Or perhaps Cass had found the girl this time.

He swore. Why was hope so insistent? As insistent as the glaring bulb. It hung about like a stink and sickened him.

With a trembling finger, he hit the button on and off, so any shriek could only last a moment before cutting out.

Silence.

He hit the button, on-off, once more.

Nothing. He pressed the button again, spoke shakily: Mosely.

Its Cass. Brisk, businesslike. I sent Junipers squad to check the supply ship for any sign of the girl. The strength in her voice was almost threatening, and Mosely didnt dare speak back. There was a fox ambush. But something strange happened. According to Juniper, the creatures gave up before they could finish the job. Mosely stared at the winking light in disbelief. Junipers alive? he whispered. Yeah. Just a scratch on her hip: Casss voice hardened. I suppose you want us to

keep up the search? Mosely lunged forwards. Get back here, Cass. Get everyone back.

Understand? Everyone back here where its safe.

Perhaps we can all hide out in your office together, said Cass. Sir.

The light on the desk winked insolently one more time and went out.

Webber, said Mosely, punching another button on the desk. Bring the Doctor here. I want to talk to him.

Have you found the girl? Webber sounded bright and hopeful. The tone soothed Moselys nerves.

No. Just get here.

He broke off contact before Webber could say anything else and spoil the mood. Mosely was in control, and he wasnt having any more bad news sneaking inside his offices.

Webber was left staring in consternation at the morgues call grille. Mosely had sounded happy, absurdly happy, and he didnt know why. The thought of telling Mosely about Baine and Parm grew more monstrous in his mind.

You heard him, Doctor, he sighed. Wed better get to his office.

Not yet. The old man was still clicking and flicking through the faces on the monitor. He clearly has nothing of import to reveal.

Because he hasnt found your friend?

And because we have yet to identify the culprit in this mystery.

I didnt think you were so bothered.

The Doctor smiled. Perhaps I have my reasons.

Are you sure your investigations arent misguided? Webber said tentatively. All the indications are that none of the telepathy in the chambers is strong enough to be responsible.

Use your intelligence, Webber, the Doctor snapped. The telepath has proven himself more than a match for the computers controlling the delta wave augmentors. He could easily fool them to fake a low assessment of his own skills.

Then how are we ever going to know? Wake all twenty telepaths?

Why not?

Its dangerous just to disconnect them from the systems. Youd been in for only a few minutes, and look what happened. Children are resilient creatures, said the Doctor, without much conviction. But many of them are undergoing surgery programmes of a year or longer. It could be catastrophic to disturb them. So as a librarian youre an expert on their medical conditions, hmm? Webber couldnt understand the old mans attitude. Well, you are a doctor. Dont you care?

Im not a doctor of medicine. The Doctor glowered at him. Besides, dont you see?

A strong telepath, once revived, could perhaps reach out with his mind and…

Webber suddenly understood. Reach out with his mind and find your friend, where we cant? He looked accusingly at the Doctor. Thats it, isnt it? All you care about.

Escape for us all is my prime concern, said the Doctor, more calmly. He returned to the shifting images on the monitor. When a man with dark skin, a broad nose and full, sensuous lips appeared on-screen, he gave a grunt of surprise and stared. Who is this person?

Webbers stomach stirred uneasily. Why?

The Doctor looked at him. Because this face was carved on the door of the building in which your two mentors died. Who is he?

Olmec. The man who looked after the petting zoo.

The old man looked at him blankly.

Olmec was the animal keeper. Kept all sorts of things: monkeys, bears, dogs… The children played with them, helped him care for them. Helped them learn about responsibility, looking after others…

One set of locked-up creatures responding to another, said the Doctor.

Very apposite.

It wasnt like that.

The Doctor ignored him. He was a favourite of the children, I take it?

Of course he was. So, of course, they could never know what really happened to him.

Explain.

When Mosely realised that we were under siege, that the foxes could stop us getting the supplies, he ordered the animals be put down. They were a drain on resources.

The Doctor nodded. A rational decision.

But Olmec couldnt do it. He loved those animals, hed cared for them for years.

Webber sat down heavily. He tried to set the animals free to fend for themselves, outside the Refuge gates. But the foxes were out there, waiting. They didnt seem to distinguish between a man or an ape or a bear. Tore into them.

Webbers voice dried. Stupid: with all the deaths hed seen, why was it that those of the animals had touched him more deeply than any of the others?

The Doctor waited patiently for a change, until Webber could speak again.

Olmec ran out, trying to save the cats. I guess they were his favourites. He as good as died in the attempt. And he didnt save a single one of them. Webber wiped his eyes. Idiot; he muttered. Me, I mean, not him. Olmec was so brave… to go out there with those things blowing together all over…

Its a narrow line that marks a hero from a fool, remarked the Doctor. He squinted at the screen. He suffered massive internal injuries, clinically dead for almost three minutes before resuscitation then, comatose. After two weeks with no marked improvement in his condition, he was placed in the dream chamber for deep-level thermal stimulation treatments.

Webber nodded. Mosely reckoned hed never come out of the coma. Olmecs fate, and the unfortunate animal massacre, was kept from the ears of the children by your Co-ordinator, I take it. The children were upset enough already, now they knew monsters

were real, and not just stories. And since they were going into the chambers anyway, they didnt need to know, except…

Well?

I was out patrolling the secure wing, the night all that happened. I could hear Parm bawling out one of the kids there. Telling her that Olmec was fine and so were all his animals, that she was an evil girl for imagining anything else…

Who was the girl? demanded the Doctor.

I dont know. Its nothing, I guess, she mustve been making it up. Kids do, dont they? The zoo area had been shut down, and the little ones were being kept well away, thank god.

If she was a telepath of this magnitude, that girl would have had eyes beyond any cage you kept her in. And if she had a particular bond with this Olmec… The Doctor stood up too. What was the girls name?

I never knew it! protested Webber. Then a slow smile spread over his face. But we know the date Olmec died. So we can cross-reference against the secure wing register and find out who was in there that night under Parms care.

The Doctors face clouded with surprise. Then he beamed at Webber. An elegant solution! Please perform the cross-reference with all speed.

Moselys voice called out of the call-grille. Webber, I asked you to take the Doctor back to my office and Im still waiting.

Webber looked up at the Doctor fearfully. We should go, come back afterwards.

Run the search first, the Doctor instructed. He smiled benignly down at Webber.

Imagine how delighted your Co-ordinator will be when you present him with the name of the person responsible for these power surges, hmm?

Webber went to another terminal to start up a new search. He was setting the parameters as quickly as his cold fingers would allow, when the Doctor cried out as if in pain.

What is it?

These records, cataloguing the subjects in the sleep chambers. The old mans voice was hoarse. One of the chambers is currently occupied by

someone with no prior medical history.

Webber stared at him. Thats impossible.

No, Webber. From these readings and statistics… I know who it must be. He laughed, a hysterical sound. I was afraid she was at risk from those creatures outside… when all the time she was caught in here.

Your friend got into the dream chambers? Webber was astonished. But how…?

I dont know. But we must act quickly to get her out. I was drawn into the world of this odious child, and it seems most likely my companion will be too. He looked gravely at Webber. And all things considered, I would feel happier if she were taking her chances with the creatures outside.

X

OLMEC TOLD ME ONCE WHY IT DOESNT RAIN VERY MUCH ON IWA. ITS BECAUSE WE

dont grow much food. We take it out of tins and packets, which grow on their own without the rain.

The rain gods name is Chac. He brings the rain, and wears a net of clouds around his shoulders. He carries a rattle, like a babys rattle, but when he shakes it, the sound is thunder. His mighty head is crowned with heron feathers, and his giant feet splash about in frothing sandals of foam.

He doesnt visit Iwa often, and his rattle stays silent. Hes very busy. He rules over a special heaven, a paradise for people who have drowned.

Olmec nearly drowned in his own blood when it spilled into his lungs. It hurt so much that he went to sleep and wouldnt wake up again. But I screamed and I shouted at him with my smart mouth and he heard me and didnt leave. But now, in this place, he cant hear me. Not like Parm and Baine. I woke them up and they were grumpy. But Olmecs still sleeping.

The sky is always blue outside and it never rains. Olmec cant drown, and Chac will not welcome him to his paradise.

Olmec will find it here with me, and you will help.

ELEVEN

JUNIPER RAISED HER HEAD FROM THE MURK OF UNCONSCIOUSNESS AND FOUND SHE

was on a trolley outside the decontamination chamber. Her arm throbbed above the elbow where someone had given her a shot, morphine maybe, and a field dressing had been crudely applied to her hip.

She remembered reaching Cass with Mette. Cass had eyed her like a cat, considering how it should behave around her to its best advantage, and then had contacted Mosely.

Hed ordered everyone to fall back. But Cass had rounded up her squad, scared silly at the sight of Juniper, at the loss of Thane and the others, and told them that they had to keep up the search, on Moselys orders.

The squad had been all for going back and ramming Moselys orders down his neck.

Juniper had shouted that Cass was lying, that she wanted to take control herself, and then the needle had jammed into her arm. Now she was lying here.

Mosely had to be warned. She was wondering if she was strong enough to move, when something slammed into her trolley with a metallic crash. She gasped as the pain jarred her side, still black and crunchy with dried blood.

Whoops. Sorry. Thought there was no-one here but us dead men. Salih, she muttered. Help me up.

I dont think youre going anywhere.

Ive got to see Mosely.

Uh-uh. Salihs angular face with its ratted crown of blond hair bobbed into view above her. Decon first, then surgerys got a new hip waiting. Then your troubles really begin.

Damn it, Salih, this is important. She only wished her mouth would

move fast enough to make it sound important. The drug had left her body almost paralysed. She guessed it wasnt just morphine masking the pain.

Just lie still, Juniper, and wait your turn. Ive got to strip these four corpses first, ready for decon.

Corpses? Juniper echoed drowsily. Dont bring back corpses. Too dangerous.

Thats what I said when Cass sent us off. And Im the lucky one, staying here to sort them out while the reclaim team troop back to chase after shadows. But then, I can see where Cass is coming from on this one. Its not just a bunch of bodies. Its evidence. His voice was stiffening. These are the people you killed back in the gully.

Me…? Juniper had to tell him it was the foxes, an ambush, but her tongue was cold and thick like a slug stuck between her chapped lips

Four corpses?

She had to see, tried to swing herself off the trolley. But as her feet hit the floor they seemed to explode in pain. The next thing she knew she was lying on the cold, hard floor, whimpering.

Pathetic, sneered Salih. You know, I used to think you were all right. Okay, you had your head so far up Moselys backside you could lick his tonsils, but out on these long-haul shifts sometimes you develop ridiculous attachments to people, dont you? Weve all been there. Cant be helped. He knelt down beside her. And then again, sometimes you just lose it, dont you? Sometimes, when youre a nurse playing soldier and youre in over your head, you fix it so other people lose theirs just to get you back out.

What are you talking ab

Mette! he hissed in her face. You think wed believe she was killed by the foxes?

You killed her yourself.

He stalked over to one of the gurneys, and raised the bulk of Mettes corpse into a sitting position. Shed taken at least two bolts to the head, and her face was a burnt mess. One clear eye sparkled out at Juniper from the blackened skin. Her charred lips cringed back from her smashed teeth.

Poor old Smiler, muttered Salih.

Not me, whispered Juniper. Not me.

Salih let the body fall back on the gurney. Sure. And she didnt hot-sauce your hip before you finished her off, right?

Thane! she wailed, the word barely recognisable even to her own lips. He shot me!

She knew it was hopeless. Salih would never believe her. And neither would anyone else. Cass had done this. Once people found out what she was meant to have done, Juniper would be useless to Mosely as an ally. Hed be more cut off than ever.

Salih crossed to the massive slab of metal that sealed the entrance to the decon chamber, and eased it open. Get stripped, and drag yourself in there, he told her, his whole body trembling. Im going for a leak. If youre not undressed by the time Im back, Ill do it myself. He spat at her. And Ill damn well enjoy myself, too.

Dont think theres many whod care after today.

Juniper heard his heavy, erratic footsteps echo away, and knew she had to get up fast. The drug was lowering her blood pressure, and it made her dizzy and light-headed as she struggled to stand.

She must be hallucinating, too, because one of the corpses was moving. It was Thane, stiffly swinging himself up, pointing at her with his one remaining arm.

Then he jumped in the air like a charge had gone through him.

The skin on his shocked face was wrinkling, paring away. Black, wet skin like mouldy apple peel was pushing through the cracks. Thanes mouth opened, then shot out of his face on long black jaws. His body swelled up, then tore open, the red, soft flesh shrinking away from the dark pit at its heart that grew wider, harder, more muscular.

A new arm, skinny and wizened, splashed out of the creatures side.

The scream of a fox rang out.

Juniper saw the open door of the decon chamber. Her side burning, she wriggled towards it. If she could only shut it before the creature

gained entrance…

The monster strode past her, passed into decontamination, and slammed the door shut behind it. Distantly, the sound of the inner door clanging open travelled to her.

After so many months of war, the foxes had finally gained access to the Refuge.

Ushered in through an open door.

Webber sensed something was wrong the moment he stepped through into Moselys office, the Doctor by his side. The Co-ordinator was red-faced and flustered, could barely sit still in his chair, kept darting suspicious glances at his intercom.

What have you learned? asked Mosely, brightly. We know now who is responsible for the destabilisation of your power supply, reported the Doctor. Jillan Helright, Webber said, consulting his notes. Aged twelve, classified as low-level

I know little Jill, said Mosely. A disruptive influence when shes awake, never mind when shes sound asleep. Well, we shall have to unplug her, shant we?

You cant do that, its too dangerous, protested the Doctor, both to her and to others who may be caught up in the dream world she has created.

The old hypocrite, Webber thought. He was all for waking her up when he had nothing personal at stake. But this could mean a safe slumber for everyone in the Refuge. He didnt know what was right and what was wrong any longer.

He blurted out his bad news: Co-ordinator, shes killed Parm and Baine. Never mind, Mosely said briskly. No-one else is going to die. No-one else. Webber swapped a nervous glance with the Doctor.

It is you who must understand us, the old man declared, stepping forwards. By drawing on the life systems, she can summon other minds into the world she has created from the datacore. At that point, in effect, dominion over these peoples well-being passes to her.

Look, Doctor, Im responsible for the lives of everyone here, Mosely snapped, not a twelve year old girl.

She is a patient in your care. You have a duty to protect her.

The Governor will back me in whatever decisions I take concerning who lives and who dies. Moselys voice sounded loud and strained. Ive thought a lot about this. This is why I asked you to come here, Doctor. Im recalling the squads. Were just going to bury ourselves alive, so the foxes cant get at us.

Listen to me

Then we can work without distractions to make the power surges go away. Mosely nodded firmly. Well disconnect the telepath, and

As if Jill was angry at the mere thought, the lights suddenly dipped, the hum of the life systems wavered. Mosely stared around, as if frightened by the dark.

The Doctor marched up to him: We have little time. These surges arent just affecting your life systems here. They are destabilising the control functions of the dream chambers.

Mosely shrugged. So we get her out, like I keep telling you.

You dont understand! roared the Doctor. This girl has been manipulating the datacore on an unconscious level for several months. She has siphoned off power and used it to create her own domain, with her own rules and logic. The datacore has accommodated this intrusion, but if you remove it just like that he clicked his fingers you unbalance the core. The systems will collapse, and you will have no sanctuary.

That cant be true, protested Mosely.

No hiding place I tell you! The Doctor banged his fist down on Moselys desk. The dream will be broken for everyone. Of course its true, you simpleton!

Doctor, said Webber diplomatically, you never told me any of this when you were advocating removing the telepath.

The old man rounded on him angrily. I didnt know for sure, then. But when I found…

The Doctor trailed off. Webber told Mosely: The girl that the squads have been looking for. Shes in a dream chamber.

Mosely stared at him. Shes… not outside? On the planet surface? Webber shook his head. Shes most likely caught up in the dream world.

So my squads have been risking their lives out there when all the time shes been asleep in here? Abruptly, the lights flickered back to their full luminescence.

Mosely didnt seem to notice. He just said very, very quietly: Get her out. And get the telepath out. Now.

Have you not listened to anything Ive told you? thundered the Doctor.

Mosely wouldnt look at him. He started shuffling perfectly ordered papers on his desk. Webber, make it happen, please.

The Doctor started to bluster. No harm must befall my… my pilot. Remember, she can take you away from here! All of you!

Were never going outside again. Mosely threw down the papers, shook his sweating head ferociously, like a dog trying to dry itself off after bathing. Thats where the bad things happen. Im never sending anyone out there again.

But, sir, said Webber gently, if we remove the telepath and the dream chambers are left useless…

No-one is going outside! squeaked Mosely. Were all staying in, together, so I can co-ordinate you!

Sir, perhaps I should ask one of the medics to

Im your Co-ordinator, Webber! You must trust me!

But sir, if

Mosely looked at him beseechingly. Trust me.

Webber looked away, wished the ground would open beneath him. Instead, the ceiling crashed down on top of him, as something huge and bestial burst out from above them.

Juniper could hear footsteps. She squirmed on the blood-spattered tiles, looking for something with which to defend herself. Maybe it was Salih coming back or

No. It was Cass who strode into the decon-antechamber. She smiled

down at Juniper.

Going somewhere, Nurse Nip? Dont think so.

Fox got in, gasped Juniper desperately. She tried to say how there mustve been fragments of the thing hidden in Thanes clothes, but the drug was slurring her speech.

Fth-gth-ith? Cass mocked. She glanced about. Wheres Salih?

Stop the fox, she moaned, and indicated the open door to decon.

Suppose hes gone off to get drunk, sloppy idiot. Cass turned back to Juniper, her stocky form shaking with silent, gloating laughter. Shame you cant talk so well right now, huh? With all this evidence stacked against you… an explanation would be interesting.

Juniper stared up at her hateful face. Killed Mette.

Cass grinned. And Im sure youve worked out why. Still, no-one will believe a word you say by the time Ive finished with you.

Doesnt matter, Junipers vision kept blurring. Get squads in there, kill fox…

The squads are all outside still, searching for invisible girls. Cass smiled.

Moselys orders, as relayed by me. What does it take to make him back down from a bad decision, huh? With four of his staff dead and the foxes about, youd think hed recall the lot, or at least retire them for a couple of lousy hours. But no, hes insisting they stay out there…

Call them back, Juniper pleaded.

Ill give them two more hours, tops. Then I think theyll come back themselves, orders or not. Cass sniggered. Their last faith in measly Mosely smashed for good.

Juniper wriggled urgently on the cold floor. In there…

Wheres Thane gone?

Cass spun round. Salih had come back from the bathrooms, but Juniper had no idea how long hed been standing there. He was gesturing now to a blood-soaked gurney. Cass, what have you done with him?

Grow up, Salih, snapped Cass. His body did nothing for me in life, I wouldnt want it now hes

Well I dont think it was Juniper, seeing as she can barely move her eyelids, let alone a fourteen-stone stiff.

Through there, Juniper wailed. Fox.

She was almost grateful for the vindication of the familiar thunder of fox-birth, somewhere deep inside Main Block.

Cass stared at Juniper furiously, like shed somehow been tricked, and slammed her hand on the general alarm call.

Perimeter guard, she snapped into the call grille over the trill of the klaxons.

Inside now, hoof it. Foxes She hesitated, as if saying it aloud would make it incontrovertible. Foxes inside Main Block.

She stepped through into the decon chamber. When Salih lingered behind, she grabbed his arm and hauled him after her.

Juniper was left alone. The drugs were warming her, muffling her drowsy head from the idiot jab of the sirens. Casss threats whirled through her thoughts. She had to call out to the perimeter guard on their way through. Maybe they would listen, maybe they would believe her.

She opened her mouth to scream for help, but no sound would come.

With no other way to express herself remaining, a single tear teased itself from her eye to run down her cheek.

XI

THIS IS HOW IT WILL WORK.

The floor is made of cheese. It brings the rats and mice.

The rats and mice attract the cats.

And when enough cats come here, I am sure that Olmec will come too.

The cats were Olmecs favourites, he loved them best of all. When he let them go and saw the monsters coming, he shouted for them to come back. He tried to scoop their furry bodies up in his big arms, but they were scared. They scratched him and bit him.

Things that are scared lash out and hurt others sometimes, without really meaning to.

When Hunahpus head was chopped off by the bat god, a turtle gave him a new one. I am like the turtle for Olmec, who is silent and blind in his head. I will give him a new head. I carved it into the doors and walls of this place to prove this is Olmecs kingdom. So Chac wont come thinking Olmec has drowned after all, and make this place his paradise.

You think its a rubbishy plan.

You think I am just a scared, silly child, and that this is a nightmare we are sharing.

Now we hear scratches at the door. And heavy wings fanning the air. The dark eyes of owls are staring in at us through the roof and the walls.

We are surrounded.

Hunhau will be coming soon.

You think its my fault were in danger, that I could wish away the bad things here if I tried. But I cant; deep down, I am bad inside, Ive been told too many times.

Ive given myself nightmares I cant wake up from.

If you help me now, we can make the doors stronger. We can make them stone.

Hear that? Nothing. The claws of the man-cats cant scratch through thick stone. The owls cant see through it to spy on us.

With you to help me, we can last out until the rats and mice come again, until the cats come to eat them, until Olmec comes to save them, and him and me, were together again.

Then we shant ever, ever be afraid or hurt again.

But do you know what?

Sometimes I think that something else is here in this place. Something Hunhau cant follow or stop. It knows about me and you. But no-one must know about it.

Its coming closer, all the time.

TWELVE

WEBBER FELT HANDS CLAMP DOWN ON HIS SHOULDERS AND TWIST HIM FREE OF THE

wreckage that covered him. He cried out. Then a furious shushing signalled that it was the Doctor who had hold of him. The old man was clearly much stronger than he looked.

Now Webber saw why he was meant to stay quiet. The fox was lying in the middle of the floor, upturned on its back. Its skin was shiny and black like a beetles. Its glistening eyes were wide open, but its jaws were firmly closed. Its dark flanks shuddered with ragged breath.

How did it get in here? gibbered Webber.

I imagine it propelled itself in pieces through the vent shaft, then reformed above us. It must have known the flimsy panelling of the ceiling could not support it and so would deliver it here to your Coordinator.

To kill him?

Or to speak with him.

Webber clambered carefully to his feet. How did it find its way?

Perhaps it absorbed local knowledge from one of its victims? The Doctor was peering intently at the fox. Clearly theyre highly intelligent creatures. I doubt the ability of spontaneously devolving and augmenting their cellular structure evolved naturally.

Webber tried to grasp what he was saying. They did it to themselves?

We all of us make errors of judgement from time to time, the Doctor said cryptically.

Webber felt sick with fear, transfixed by the nightmare creature lying in the middle of the floor like an oversized spider. Mosely was staring at it just the same, in speechless outrage.

Sir! Webber hissed. Weve got to get out of here!

Mosely was starting to shake.

Sir, quickly, while its hurt.

Its not hurt, remarked the Doctor, taking a cautious step towards it.

It must be, muttered Webber.

Why? the Doctor demanded. Because its not attacking you? See for yourself. He gestured, munificently. Its prostrating itself before you. Like a dog before its master.

Webber looked again, and saw what the Doctor was getting at. The creature was holding itself stiffly on its back; head laid sideways, both legs and one of its arms in the air. The other arm was tiny and useless, and flicked at its side. Suddenly, in a blur of movement, the fox flipped itself round onto its front. Mosely cried out, flinched back, but the alien proceeded to abase itself at his feet, pushing its hindquarters up in the air while slinking forwards on its crispy elbows, head scraping across the floor and leaving glistening slime in its wake.

Webber couldnt take it in. But these are aggressive creatures. Why should they suddenly act this way? A sudden surrender? suggested the Doctor. Perhaps theyve been studying the actions of some of Olmecs stray dogs, hmm? Mosely continued staring at the grovelling monster. If he was unstable before, surely this was the final straw. No, he breathed. Its a trick. Its a trick.

Listen to me, Co-ordinator, the Doctor commanded. Most civilisations have a tendency to tribalism, dividing into social and political factions. The vulgar display in this very office earlier today demonstrated most clearly that while you hold power for now, there are others who would usurp you: He gestured at the creature at Moselys feet. This creature could have killed us all if it desired to. Perhaps it is representative of a peaceful faction amongst its people?

Or its a trick, said Webber. Its obvious. One of them gets in here and makes itself conspicuous. All our guards rally round to kill it, leaving no-one manning the external defences. And all its friends simply walk inside! He shouted across to Mosely. We know how badly they want to get in here!

Yes, said Mosely at last, his voice a cracked whisper. But why? Why are they so desperate to gain access, to kill us all?

The creature opened its mouth and screamed. A vortex built around

its blurring body and it began to disintegrate. Webber nearly gagged at the stench of burst guts and sulphur that filled the room. Then, sluggishly, the monster began to reform. With a bone-rattling boom of displaced air, the great, canine head layered itself from splats of offal and bone, then came the twisted neck, the sweaty, heaving sides and the black, crackling legs.

The creature opened its jaws again, and made a snivelling, desolate noise in its throat that was strangely human. Webber had heard the sound before in the library quiet room, from a hundred children smarting from their surgery.

The creature shuddered and spoke, its voice like treacle rolling over ice: help

Help, breathed the Doctor. Perhaps thats what they came to you for.

No, said Mosely, looking only now at the Doctor, tears in his eyes. No, they came to destroy us. They didnt try to communicate. They killed three unarmed men at first contact, out in the plains. A deliberate show of strength.

Or of desperation! the Doctor thundered. Desperate people do desperate things, do they not, Co-ordinator? Youre prepared to kill someone very dear to me, along with a defenceless invalid in your care, in order to ensure your own survival. Is that so very different? This creature is alien to you in appearance, but in its actions it is perhaps more similar than you care to admit!

A heavy silence followed. Everyone stared at the creature hunched up on the floor.

Then Webbers head began to throb. It felt like something was sowing a cold prickling sensation down his spine.

Mosely clutched his temples. I… I can hear something. No, see something…

Its communicating with its mind, breathed the Doctor. He cackled harshly. Perhaps this creature will make telepaths of you all. What do you see?

Picture, dark and red and murky…

Its Boothe, whispered Webber. One of the Head Guards, they killed him… And theres Thane. This one has merged with Thane.

The Doctor crossed over to the creature and stooped to inspect it. The energy required to keep their bodies at a cellular level must push them to the limits of endurance. Perhaps they borrow strength from the bodies of others from time to time.

The fox flinched away, looked at Webber with its huge globular eyes. Webber was reeling. He could feel the idea of sorry in his head. Then it changed to fear. Some animals impression of fear, trapped in a dark, smoky glass. A mirror. A mirror showing the distorted reflection of one of the foxes.

Mosely squealed like hed been stuck with a pin, and the heavy lids of his eyes flapped open. In the same instant, Webber knew what the creature was saying.

They want to attack the dream chambers. They know what they are. Know theyre our last hope. With that realisation, Webber hated the foxes. He wanted to crush their wet flesh under his heel, tear each of them apart with his bare hands, wreck every last hope and dream they might have of being whole, and safe and secure.

Then his heart lurched as he realised that he was looking at himself in the mirrored glass.

These were the foxs feelings, not his own.

Revenge? he whispered. Because we wouldnt help them? But we couldnt hear what they were saying!

Mosely slumped back, broken, in his chair. And all we can give them now is our sacrifice.

Its more than that… muttered the Doctor. I cant quite interpret. Your comrades mind is forming the words and pictures for you, so you might understand…

He cocked his head. It pities you. But not all of them feel as this one does. They travelled through space to your Refuge not so much to seek your help, as… your service.

Webber realised that the Doctor must be getting a clearer picture than he was of what the thing was saying. But Webber didnt want it. He didnt want this thing putting thoughts in his head. Doctor, how can you take the side of these inhuman killers over

He was drowned out by the sudden, insistent blare of the klaxons. The creature raised itself to a standing position in a blur of movement, suddenly alert. Webber skittered back, and even Mosely took notice.

What is that noise? demanded the Doctor.

Main alarm, shouted Webber over the pulsating racket. An emergency. Maybe the fox was sighted. He peered out into the corridor and saw Cass pelting towards them, Salih close behind her. He ducked back in. Theyve tracked it here.

Theyll kill it, muttered the Doctor, barely audible above the alarm. Stop them, Webber. They cant know this creature means us no harm.

Doctor, even if thats true, theres no guarantee the rest of them

Of course theres no guarantee, stormed the Doctor. But I guarantee you this: if weapons are used in place of words, any hopes of ending the conflict between your two races will be ended.

Webber stared at him. What do you mean, our two races?

The Doctor opened his mouth to answer, but Cass burst in and knocked him aside.

Fox! Cass tossed a triumphant glance back at Salih. See? Juniper sold us out to the foxes, gave them intelligence, told them where to go to cause maximum damage.

But it took Thanes body, Salih shouted. Thane couldve

Its not taking anyone elses, Cass aimed her rifle.

The fox backed away, obscuring Mosely from view. It reached out with its withered arm.

This one doesnt mean us any harm! yelled Webber.

help

Cass opened fire. The creature howled in pain as the laser bolts tore into it. It staggered back, knocking into Moselys chair.

This killing is senseless, woman! It came here for your sakes! shouted the Doctor, white with fury. It wants to help you.

Salih joined in with the gunfire. The fox slumped forwards onto its

knees, screamed again and started to break up.

The great, dark creature was coming undone, unravelling like frayed material. Salih stopped shooting. The shadow of Mosely was visible now through the misty, sulphurous remains of the monster.

You must make peace and help these poor, desperate people! The Doctor marched up to Cass. Or are you ready to commit genocide as well as suicide, hmm?

Cass shot him a poisonous glance, and let off one more bolt.

It scorched through the disintegrating torso of the creature and into Moselys chest.

The impact sent him spinning across the office in his chair, shrieking as he went.

The chair slammed into the far wall, jarred him off and into a heap on the tiled floor.

The klaxons blared on with their one-note song, like fingers of sound pointing at Cass: You. You. You. You.

Salih, like Webber, was shocked silent by what hed seen. But from the surprised smile on Casss face, she seemed to be taking the klaxons chant as salutary, a proclamation.

You killed him, Salih spluttered at last.

I wasnt aiming for Mosely, she retorted.

Well you got him anyway. Salih looked down at his feet, at the rustling remains of the fox among the debris from the ceiling. So now what the hell are you going to do?

Assume command, she said simply.

Webber found his voice at last. You cant.

Im best qualified to do so: She raised her gun to cover Salih. After the current crisis is dealt with, we can take a vote on it. Youll second me, Salih.

Salih said nothing, stared at his feet.

Think about it. Ill be needing a deputy I can rely on. Cass lowered the

gun. You too, Webber. Im sure I can find a suitable position for you. She crossed to Moselys desk, hit the alarm override. The klaxons cut off, leaving a miserable, heavy silence in the room.

Webber broke it. You dont understand the situation here, Cass. Were in danger, all of us! he shouted.

With a real fighter co-ordinating our defence, well beat the foxes, she said calmly. Well spread the supplies round a skeleton staff and put everyone else in the dream chambers. Well still be standing when Earth comes to call.

Not if we cant stop these power surges!

Thats something for the tech-heads to worry about, Webber, not you.

Tell her, Doctor!

But the Doctor had gone.

Whats he planning, Webber? Cass hissed. She trained her gun on him. Our mysterious so-called doctor who prefers the foxes to us.

Webber raised his hands, licked his dry lips. He thinks we can make peace with them.

Help them. Theyre planning to destroy the dream chambers

How would you know that?

And if they dont, the power surges probably will

How would you know that? Cass thundered. Answer me!

They… It told us…

Cass snorted. You mean it dropped in for a cup of tea and to tell you its plans?

Salih turned to Cass. You said yourself, when they attacked last, tried to tear open the vent, that it was like they knew about the dream chambers.

Juniper mustve told them. She gave Webber a cruel smile. Or maybe it was you?

Theyre telepathic! he yelled, fists bunched in frustration. There are

two hundred active minds in those chambers, locked in blackness, reaching out for light. The foxes couldnt miss them!

Cass nodded. Especially if they were helped.

We should help them. Webber knew hed blown all hope of them listening to him now, but he gabbled on. Dont you see? If were not at war, we dont have to hide away!

You think we can trust those creatures? Cass jabbed the gun at him. And your friend, the Doctor, who drops in out of nowhere and bosses everyone about do you think we can trust him?

There was another power surge. Salih swore as the lights flickered and the whine of the power systems grew strangled.

Suddenly there was a magnesium-bright flash and foul-smelling smoke was belching from the intercom system on Moselys desk.

Cass turned in alarm. She reached out for the sparking controls, then angrily snatched her hand away. Communications are fused, she choked, staggering back from the smoke.

Webber turned and ran.

He had a good idea where the Doctor would be heading.

Get after him, shouted Cass.

Salih stared at her. Since when did Webber become the enemy?

Havent you worked it out? she yelled. Juniper, Webber, the old man theyre all in it together! Selling us out to the foxes! Wondering if hed buy it, she tightened her grip on her gun. If thats true, Salih said at last, its a shame that you cant sound the

alarms, isnt it?

Try the call grille, Cass snapped. The perimeter guards should be coming.

Salih did as he was told, ducked outside the office and tried it. Hello? Anyone?

The connection was stone dead. Nothing, he shouted back to Cass. Not even static.

Can you fix it?

Salih tapped at the nutritionist insignia on his uniform. I can fix you a salad. I draw the line at communications systems.

All right. She booted a fallen ceiling panel sullenly. Just get after Webber like I said.

What about the perimeter guard? You ordered them in here, but they dont know where theyre going, and now you cant even contact them!

Cass scowled. He was right. This wasnt how it should be. Confusion, alarm, mistakes, this was Moselys way. Theyll make for here, she snapped, face reddening. Its obvious.

Salih jogged across to inspect Moselys body. Equally obvious: we need a medic.

Leave him, Cass snapped.

Hes still breathing. The foxs body mustve taken some of the charge. Salih glanced at her. Your takeover bid might be a bit previous.

All right, said Cass. Fetch a medic then. Get off to the rec rooms.

Fine, said Salih. And if I spot twenty perimeter guards running about lost, Ill point them this way.

Cass watched him slouch away.

She waited a few moments.

Then she crossed to Moselys body. The Co-ordinators chest was drenched with blood, and his moustache was crusty with it. His breathing came in soft, shallow movements.

He looked bad. A few scabrous patches of black wafted around his body, but they were crispy and dead like old skin.

She put down the gun, and picked up a silk cushion from the couch beside her. Its not been much of a life for you, has it, Mosely? said Cass softly. She licked her finger and scrubbed at his moustache, cleaning away the clotted gore, making him presentable. And I dont think any of us really need more complications, do we?

Then she held the cushion against his face.

Slip away, now, Co-ordinator, she breathed. Your worries are over now. These people need a hero.

Then a confused noise outside carried like fresh smoke through the ruined office. Her heart caught at the sound of boots clattering, shouts of alarm.

And the dull crump of displaced air.

Again and again.

XII

SUSAN COULD HEAR THE SCRATCHING SOUND STARTING UP AGAIN OUTSIDE THE HOUSE.

Jill looked at her nervously.

Theyre getting stronger, Susan said. But she used her real mouth, and her bottom lip fell away. She looked down in horror and saw it lying at her feet on the cheese floor like a red slug.

Leave it, said Jill in her mind. You can grow new lips later, when were away from here.

Well never get away from here. Susan scrunched up her long dark hair in her fists.

I told you, this isnt real, any of it. Its a dream were stuck in. She could remember, back in the real world, Jills voice calling to her as she raced along the dark, smoky tunnels; could picture herself tugging open a narrow door and tumbling inside. Tiny medical wires and filaments had caught her body before it could fall, but her mind had slopped out and into here. How many others had Jill called to?

I wont let you spoil things, Jill told her. She reached out a hand to Susans throat. If its just a dream, it doesnt matter if you help me, does it? If I wake up from it, so will you. Wheres the harm?

Susan knew that the woman and the man in the tiled room had been real, and that they had been killed for real too. She looked down at the lip-slug, and felt like weeping.

Then Chloe the cat snatched it up in her teeth and took it into the cupboard.

We should hide again, said Jill.

Susan clambered into the cupboard with the little girl and her cat and let the doors close on them. All the time the beating of wings, and the tapping of claws on stone was getting louder and louder.

THIRTEEN

DOCTOR! WEBBER SHOUTED.

The old man had made straight for the dream chambers, Just as Webber had guessed.

Hed hobbled along the dark, winding passages in search of an empty casket, and now he was trying to squeeze inside.

Leave me alone. The Doctor renewed his efforts to get inside. I knew youd come here, panted Webber. The old boy was surprisingly quick on his feet. Naturally you did. And have you come to stop me in the name of your new leader? Webber shook his head. I ran away. The Doctor raised his eyebrows, and his eyes sparkled strangely.

Youve chosen to become a fugitive from your own people? I hope its not as dramatic as that, Webber said. I know what you have to do is important for all of us, whatever your motivations.

The Doctor nodded, but had the decency to look a shade embarrassed.

Webber shrugged. Cass will come looking for you, with guards. She thinks youre working for the foxes.

And what do you think, Webber? asked the Doctor mildly.

I dont think Earth sent you. I dont think your companion is a pilot, and even if she were, I dont think theres any ship that could take us home.

You are correct, admitted the Doctor.

Webber felt on a roll. I dont even think youre human.

Mercifully, I am not.

But what I do think… is that all that doesnt make you inhuman. It doesnt make you my enemy. Does it? Webber forced a hopeful smile. I dont think it does.

The Doctor smiled. Im pleased to observe a scintilla of intelligence in your species. He tried to wriggle through into the chamber and scowled as he heaved against the glass. This door is jammed.

Webber saw there was a hairline crack in the soft-glowing glass, checked the display.

It still seems functional.

Yes, yes, I checked that, of course. And a good thing it is. The Doctor indicated the filaments protruding from the smoky glass of the inner wall. I calculate that the connections through to this chamber come from a nodal point of the power feed interface. I can use that to separate the childs dream world from the datacore if theres time remaining to complete the work.

What are you planning to do?

First, I shall siphon off a controlled low-level power-flow from the main systems through to that part of the datacore sustaining the dream world. Once that tumour is isolated, I can cut it out, so to speak, and thus restabilise the datacore. He chuckled. No-one need have nightmares.

Webber was surprised to find that he actually understood the principle. How long do you think we have before the foxes come to destroy this place?

The Doctor smiled sadly. Impossible to say.

Webber helped squeeze the Doctor through the gap, and heaved the door back shut. He watched the old mans silhouette shift about inside, his shadow fingers catching in cobwebs. He would wait out here, and if anyone or anything came here, perhaps he could lead it away.

Perhaps.

He slumped down to his haunches miserably, massaging his temples with both hands.

Unseen, round his feet, black scraps skittered like papery ashes.

Juniper heard footsteps, getting closer. She gritted her teeth and forced her leaden body to move. Perhaps she could hide behind one of the gurneys.

She edged round, turning her back on the noise.

And it jabbed her in the arm with a needle.

She gasped as a flood of warmth surged through her.

Adrenaline shot, hissed a voice in her ear.

She wriggled round as the heat eased her joints. Salih?

He ran a hand through his floppy fringe flamboyantly. Yeah. I heard what Cass said to you before. But since Im too chicken-shit to stand up to her, I thought Id let you try. He paused. If you can stand at all, that is?

Her mouth felt like shed been chewing cat fur. How did you know what to give me?

she muttered.

I take them for the boredom sometimes, and I know how they make me feel. Figured you could use some. He cleared his throat. Of course, if you end up on the winners side in this mess, you never heard that.

Whats happened to Mosely?

Cass shot him along with the fox. Seems its becoming a habit with her.

She killed him?

No. But he doesnt look too clever.

She fought to keep calm. I didnt hear anyone call for a medic.

Communications burnt out in that last power surge. Im supposed to be getting one now. I figure you count. He helped her up, and eyed her nervously. Did any perimeter guards pass by here?

Juniper closed her eyes, rubbed her head. South quarter did… Im not sure when though.

Good, said Salih. Then theyre not around to shoot me for deserting.

What are you talking about?

Im out of here. The foxes have got inside

One fox. It took over Thane, somehow.

Well Im not going to be the next one who carries them in. Salih nodded firmly.

Between them and Cass, Id rather take my chances outside, even if the

foxes are supposed to be friendly now.

What?

Some madness Webber and that old man were spouting on about. Forget it. Im gone.

But Salih, what can I do on my

They both jumped at the sound of thunder deep inside the Refuge.

Youre not on your own, said Salih. Then he pushed past her into the twilight world waiting outside the antechamber.

Come back! she yelled helplessly.

For a few seconds there was silence. Then the rush and boom of another fox conjuring itself from the ether carried to her, close by, and Salih came dashing back inside.

Your wish is my command, he said hurriedly. Then he bundled her onto the gurney and pushed her along ahead of him through the decon chamber, into the Refuge.

Change of plan, he explained. With no perimeter guards, the foxes are strolling in like they own the place.

Distantly ahead, they heard the sounds of screaming men and women, and the howls of foxes. Juniper gazed up at Salih, feeling as scared as he looked.

Which they probably do, she muttered.

So, said Salih, where do we curl up and hide?

Munitions store, said Juniper.

Salih shook his head despairingly. You think firing two guns instead of one will make any difference against those things?

Its not guns I want, she said, and its not for the foxes.

Cass threw away the pillow and charged outside into the fray, rifle raised and ready.

A screaming guard flew through the air and cannoned into her. The breath blasted from her, she tried to push the man clear. His head lolled about uselessly on his raw neck as she heaved him aside and got to her knees.

Four towering foxes were lurching down the narrow corridor towards her and the two remaining guards, Demetri and Marsh. The two men backed away until they were level with her, trying to focus their fire on one of the foxes at a time. But the creatures kept shifting step, shielding each other, so none took more than a few bolts at one time. They were like living corpses that kept on coming, snarling and snapping.

Cass joined in with the firing, each kickback from her rifle like an adrenaline shot.

She was already filing her report to Earth-A in her head.

Though outnumbered, we were able to hold off the alien aggressors.

A fox lunged forwards and snatched away Demetris gun with one massive hooked hand.

As Demetri looked round in panic, Cass scooped up the dead guards rifle and tossed it to him.

I was able to keep morale high in the darkest situations. Hold on to your weapons you idiots or Ill kill you myself! she screamed.

Another fox lashed out with its huge claw, impaled Marsh on two crooked fingers, then flicked him off against the wall. Marsh left a deep red smear on the white surface as he fell choking to the ground.

I commanded the selfless support of all who fought for me.

Cass hauled up Marsh and gripped him round the neck, used him as a human shield to get closer to the foxes. Her rifle spat blast after scorching blast at the creatures.

Marsh shook against her and screamed as they swiped and tore great stringy chunks from his body.

She dropped his dead weight and fell back. The foxes seemed unharmed, just angrier than ever. We cant stop them! yelled Demetri, firing off a frenzy of laser blasts into a foxs face. It bit at the smoking light, roared and kept coming.

My orders remained succinct and easy to follow.

Out of here! she called. Clutching the gun in both white-knuckle hands, Cass turned and pitched down the corridor. Follow me! But Demetri raced on ahead of her. Only things Im following are the exit signs! This goes down in my report! she screamed after him.

XIII

LOOK, BREATHED JILL.

A rat was snuffling back inside, its eyes glassy and dark like mirrors. Another came inside after it, then two white mice. Their eyes were pink and seemed to glow in the gloom.

Concentrate, Susan. Make them come.

Susan tried to relax, tried to focus her mind. She could picture the rats, crawling and wriggling and squirming about in all sorts of shapes and sizes. She could invite them into the room. But why didnt they just make the cats come inside if that was the idea? Susan pictured a plump black cat.

Dont, Jill snapped at her. It has to be the way it would be if it was real.

Perhaps its come to see Chloe.

No. The cats must be hungry. The cats must want to feed. Jill stroked Chloe, and the cat purred happily. I made up Chloe from nothing, like I made this whole house, this whole world. She does whatever I want her to, but shes not real. We need the real Olmec to come. If we make the mice and rats hungry, they will come for the cheese. If we make the cats hungry, they will come for the rats and mice.

And Olmec is hungry… to see his cats again?

Of course he is, silly. And when he sees me here too, and sees that I have brought cats back to him, he will be so happy. He will kiss me and kiss me and tell me stories and well never be hungry for anything ever again.

The room was filling with scuttling rats, plump and quizzical. But Susan could see no cats.

Maybe they cant get inside, she thought. We made the walls too strong.

There are little flaps in the wall, Susan, growled Jill. Its easy for them to get inside. They can smell juicy rat meat, succulent mice… Theyre coming here…

Susan nodded, though her eyes were shut. Chloe was coiled in her lap, and the cats body trembled with silent purrs. Then a coldness misted through her, and Jill giggled.

Look now. Didnt I tell you?

Cats! whispered Susan, the word coming out funny and bloody in her lipless mouth.

But she didnt care, she was too excited. Lots and lots of cats!

Jill nodded happily, hugged Susans arm. There have never been so many before.

They filled the room; Susan didnt know the names, but Jill did: Maine coons and Abyssinians and Persians and Manxes and

A man poked his head through the low doorway. He had golden-brown skin, and his hair was short dark fuzz. His eyes were warm and his teeth were white as he grinned in at them.

Olmec! Jill whooped, jumped up and down, almost knocked the cupboard over. Olmec, youre here!

Youre safe now, said Olmec. His voice was rich and deep, that of a born storyteller. Well always be together and I will never go away. Not ever again.

Susan looked at Jill. The girl was crying, the tears dribbling down to the big burst boil of her ruined mouth, then mixing in with the fresh blood that dripped from it.

Get out of here, she whispered to Susan, and pushed her out of the cupboard.

Susan fell on some rats, which wriggled and squeaked as they squashed into her. She cried out in alarm, but Olmec didnt react. He stood upright in the room now, dressed in a beige uniform with grass stains on the knees, the wonderful warm smile still on his face.

Of course, Olmec went on, youre not old enough for us to grownup kiss yet, but we can hug.

Can we do the safe kisses? Jill asked, running to his arms.

Olmec planted a kiss on her blonde head, and she giggled.

Susan watched uneasily. This wasnt right, she knew that, but there was nothing threatening about Olmec, nothing sinister about the way he stroked the girls ruined face. It was as if he loved Jill right back, not as an adult but with the simplicity of a child.

Realisation snapped sharp teeth in Susans mind. Hes not real, Jill.

Shut up! Jill shouted. Ive found him, and hes found me, and now well be safe!

Its just the trace of him! Susan protested. Hes not like Parm, or Baine!

Theres not enough of his mind left for him to come as he was!

Jill wriggled out of Olmecs tight embrace. Dont lie, Susan.

Hes just as you remember him from outside, isnt he? Susan yelled, choking on the blood that flooded out between her rotting teeth. Just how you want him to be, and nothing else. Look!

Susan pointed at Olmec, who was standing frozen as a statue, smiling stupidly. Jill turned to him and balled her little fists. No, its not true!

Well always be together and I will never go away, said Olmec again, flickering into life. Not ever again.

Susan clutched her head as Jill screamed with rage. The walls that kept the place so dark and dingy grew suddenly translucent.

Through the misty barriers she could see that the air outside was thick with white owls.

Dont let them in! Susan shouted, spitting out loose teeth. The rats were sent into a frenzy at the sight of the giant birds, and the ghostly cats leapt and danced before them. Jill, we have to make the walls strong again. Dont let it all go!

Hes got to come for real, thundered Jill. Well have to try harder.

Susan hugged herself. Her fingernails bit into the rubbery flesh of her ribs, teased out blood. Theres no time!

Ill make time! she hissed.

The stone insinuated itself back between the owls and their hiding place. But the beating of wings was faster, more urgent, and downstairs, the great, stalking man-jaguars were breaking through.

FOURTEEN

THE SWEAT WAS BEADING ON HIS WRINKLED BROW AS HE WORKED WITH UNDIGNIFIED

speed on the filament connections. He fought the urge to wipe it clear with his sleeve whenever he attempted to do so, the nanocables piercing his wrists snagged at their full extent, and yanked back his hand. It was a painful exercise that hed absent-mindedly performed half a dozen times.

Remotely rerouting the power flow was relatively easy to accomplish. But to realign the power with sufficient delicacy he knew he must act as a conduit himself, connect himself into the systems.

He knew it would be dangerous. He had been unable to sense the interface before. But surely, now he had experience of the childs powers…

He prepared the last few connections, but knew he couldnt complete the link until his mind was inside and summoning the systems. He did not relish returning to the childs world.

But his granddaughter was depending on him.

He closed his eyes, felt sweat trickle down his temples. He needed a way inside, one that he could open when ready, and so pictured a door in his mind.

He chose a plain blue door, simple and square. An instant later it bore the familiar carving of the animal keeper, Olmec, in its centre.

Before he could even react, the door was flung open by an unseen hand and he was dragged inside the whiteness beyond it.

The foxes cant be far ahead of us now, hissed Salih. It felt strange and not a little scary to think that Juniper would be helpless without him to push her down the dingy white corridors.

Good, she whispered, and clutched the grey holdall more tightly to her chest.

Salih sighed. Jesus knows, I shouldve left you paralysed and got

paralytic myself.

Were getting close to Moselys office, Juniper said softly. Can you push me in to see him?

Ive told you, its not pretty.

Whatever.

As they turned the corner, she saw two bloodied bodies outside Moselys office.

Juniper closed her eyes.

Marsh and Sanderson, muttered Salih. Jesus. They both owe me cigarettes.

Please, Salih, just wheel me inside.

As milady commands.

But the office, half caved-in and hazy with smoke, was empty.

Salih stared about indignantly. He was there when I left him. And he wasnt going anywhere in a hurry.

Juniper stared at the wreck. He… Maybe he felt better?

Or hes been hidden away, muttered Salih. Cass shot Mette in the face. Maybe her finger slipped on the trigger again.

Weve got to find her.

Preferably before we find the foxes, said Salih. Let me stand behind her when it comes to the crunch. A body like hers was meant for taking shrapnel.

I think its too late for that. Over the rat-squeaks of the gurney wheels, Juniper could hear the distant clamour of yowling and laser fire. Weve already found them.

Cass crashed along shadowy, disused corridors, flinging open doors, looking out for people to pressgang. The rec rooms and staff quarters

were all empty, as if their terrified occupants had worked out that they were the first places the bogeymen would come looking. And while shed occasionally come across clusters of terrified personnel hiding in the shadows, or flattening themselves behind doors or under bunks, none of the spineless rabble wanted to fight. With the foxes now breaching their base and communications out of action, there was no time to round up sufficient numbers to form an effective force to stop the creatures.

An ear-splitting howl close by told her shed stumbled back into the path of the foxes. No-one was standing in their way.

The tiled floors gave way here to smooth, dark rock, a passage carved into the obsidian mountainside. The foxes were making for the dream chambers, as Webber had prophesised.

She pelted ahead of them down the main tunnel, dark and glowing with smoky light. And she glimpsed movement ahead, a slender form ducking aside. She skidded to a stop.

Webber? she called, panting softly for breath.

No reply.

Webber, I know its you.

Stay back, Cass.

He sounded shaky. Your friends are close by, Webber. The foxes.

Theyre not my friends.

You led them here, didnt you?

Ive been working to save the dream chambers! he shouted. Not to destroy them, you stupid woman!

Wheres the old man?

No answer.

Come here, Webber. She began walking slowly forwards. Come out in the open and lets talk.

No. Stay back or… or Ill shoot you.

A bookworm like you? She kept walking. You cant even get a life, let

alone take one. Stay back, I said. By opening his mouth, the fool was giving away his position. She noticed him from the corner of her eye, crouched down in the shadows,

back pressed against the wall in a pathetic attempt to hide.

She walked past like she somehow hadnt seen him, then spun round and jammed her rifle barrel into his neck. Up.

Why? Cant you kill me on my knees?

Feeling brave are we, bookworm? She hauled him to his feet, twisted his arm round behind his back. Good. So lets go and meet your friends the foxes.

She marched him onwards, back up the tunnel that fed into a ward in the main medical wing, now long disused. Soon she could hear heavy, ponderous footsteps grinding grit into the tiled floor. The foxes were making slow progress, and it fitted her theory.

Hear that? she hissed, twisting his arm. Theyre slowing down. Soon theyll fall apart, just as they always do outside. If I just have the time, I can round up enough people to stop them.

What happened to your guards?

Rabble, she spat. A disgrace to their uniform.

Theyre not soldiers, Cass, theyre security, gasped Webber. Their job heres to restrain children throwing tantrums or stop any brawls that get out of hand.

Well, thats not their job any more. Were under attack, and everyone here has a responsibility to protect whats theirs.

That doesnt mean they have to fight! Not now weve actually made contact with

You want to talk to them? hissed Cass in his ear. Be my guest.

They turned into the dingy ward reception block. The artificial windows were turned off, and the lighting strips were conserving energy at half power.

Suddenly Cass saw movement down a side-corridor. She aimed her gun into the shadows. Hold it! Its me, Salih! Cass narrowed her eyes, peered into the gloom.

About bloody time. Whered you go to find your medic, off-world? I found the medic all right, Salih called, I just couldnt find the corpse. Whos that youve got there? Our little traitor, Webber. Salih was holding back in the shadows, crouched behind a gurney with his gun at the ready. Cass frowned. What do you mean, you couldnt find the

She broke off, bellowed in anger as Webber stamped down hard on her foot and wrenched his arm free. She caught him a hard blow to the face, and he went down. But as he did so, he kicked her feet from under her. She toppled back and thudded against the wall, and Webber scrambled over, managed to wrestle the gun away from her. He jabbed it at her head.

Dont just stand there, Salih, bawled Cass, take him!

Ill kill her! Webber yelled at the shadows.

Do it! she screamed.

There was a flash of laser light from the dim side-corridor.

Cass screamed as her ribs bubbled and smoked. She fell to her knees, her hands gripping the charred hole in her uniform.

She heard Salihs deadpan voice: Sorry. Missed.

Though half-blinded with the pain and the after-glare of the laser fire, Cass could still discern the foxes, shambling along the corridor towards her. Three of them. The fourth must have fallen apart. If she could just hold on till the rest of them followed…

She crawled painfully away, her breath ragged, blood bubbling through her teeth.

There was a trundling, squeaking noise of something approaching. Salihs gurney rattled out of the side-corridor and crashed into the wall ahead of Cass.

She hissed like an angry cat as Junipers voice rang out: Webber, run! Get out of here!

He didnt hesitate.

Cass struggled to push the gurney aside, the metal cold against her hot, bloody fingers. It was sputtering with metallic ticks and tocks, like the gurney was loaded with clocks.

The foxes roared and snapped their long jaws, lumbered closer. They were almost on top of her now, long, meaty fingers flexing and cracking.

But the ticking trolley had taken all her attention. She remembered Moselys idea to seal off the Refuge with demolition charges.

Unlike all the other ideas hed ever had, this one blew Cass away.

XIV

SEE THE STORIES IN MY MIND, JILL WHISPERED. JUST THE WAY OLMEC TOLD THEM.

Susan nodded, but her eyes clouded as she heard a stealthy tread on the stairs. The unknown Things were creeping in.

Ignore them, Jill hissed. Theyre not as bad as Cabraca, the giant, the destroyer of mountains. Hunahpu and Xbalanque, before they shone in the sky, they thought they could never beat him. But they made him a dish of poisoned wildfowl. Like those flying things outside, all mashed up with old bones and bad blood. And Cabraca grew so weak, the hero twins buried him in the earth, buried him alive.

Yes, said Susan, as visions played in her mind and twisted her heart. Yes, I can see them. And I can see the bone fetched by the dog god, Xolotl, the bone of the first humans whom the gods destroyed.

Good, said Jill. Its like one of my bones, isnt it?

Its a rib. A spare rib!

Xolotls scaring the cats, Jill said. Quickly. Let him take the bone to the hero sons of the goddess, the one who sired the stone dagger and threw it to Earth.

Theyre taking the bone and sprinkling it with their blood, Susan reported, transfixed by the images. Its growing into children, a boy and a girl.

You and me! laughed Jill. Its you and me!

Im not a boy! Susan protested.

But youre not just a girl either! Youre a Susan! And they giggled, so caught up in the story that they barely registered more footsteps on the stair.

The hero sons fed the boy and the girl on thistlemilk

Tastes like sick! groaned Jill, laughing with glee.

and human life returned to Earth to serve the gods.

One of them, said Jill, suddenly serious, wants us to serve him now.

No, said Susan, afraid again. But it seemed nothing now could distract from the vividness of the story. It had merged with their own world, they were telling their own story. She heard another noise beyond the dark doorway, hadnt realised the jaguar-men were so close by.

We know who it is, Jill whispered. But we mustnt be scared.

Hell kill us! Susan whimpered. Killing is what Hunhau does! You brought him here, you made him do it.

I know why, now, Jill told her, raptly. I understand it. Thats what Olmecs hungry for!

Susan looked at her uncertainly.

He was dead. His blood didnt water the soil, it leaked inside him and he drowned in it. He didnt want to come back out then, and he doesnt want to come back now.

Olmec nodded with a sad smile. I would rather float in the dark backwaters of Chacs paradise for drowned men. But to get there I must die for real.

Jill nodded decisively. See?

Youre just putting words in his mouth again! sighed Susan.

He wants Hunhau to come, I know it! Jill gripped her arm. But when he sees Hunhau has come for us, hell fight him. And hell win. He wont let any harm come to us.

Susan stared at her helplessly. How do you know? How can you be sure?

Because, said Jill patiently, hes Olmec.

FIFTEEN

THE TRAVELLER FOUND HIMSELF IN THE CHILDS DREAM WORLD AGAIN. IT WAS HOTTER

than before. The sky was a deeper blue, almost the indigo of night. The first stars were shining down.

Standing before him was a four-walled pyramid. He sensed his granddaughter close by, but also some great power, threatening everything.

There was no door in the wall, so he walked to the corner.

It was like stepping from an enchanted glade into the midst of an ugly battle. On this side of the building, white birds hurled themselves at the high stone walls, bloodying themselves, breaking their wings, but renewing their numbers constantly as if fashioned from the strange smoke that poured from the chimney pot. Below, a door hung open, flanked by powerful bipeds that looked half man, half leonine. He recognised the yellow glint of the eye that had spied him from the undergrowth outside the house of pain. The creatures had grown bolder than before. Stronger.

The snarling beasts stepped aside as a new figure swam into focus. The traveller withdrew not just from the sight of it, but from the sense of it. A dark, cold presence, skeletal like a dead tree. It moved into the building jerkily.

The traveller felt old and afraid. It mustnt see him.

He closed his eyes, summoned all his strength, pictured the filaments that needed connecting in his minds eye, to reassure himself that he had an escape route.

But he could see only his fingers, clawing the air.

There was a rustling in the nearby undergrowth, and his eyes snapped open.

A baby was crawling towards him along an over-tangled path. Its dark eyes looked up at him, wide and innocent.

Before he could move, the baby reached out for his leg and held on to it. It giggled loudly.

He thought of the sinister figure close by, and looked furiously down at the human cub.

Its face clouded as if it was about to burst into tears. Mindful of the noise, he stooped and picked up the child ready to cover its mouth. Something caught its attention, and it pointed to a nearby tree.

It was a tall, gnarled tree, with thick branches that pushed up and out to hang over the four-walled pyramid.

There was a square, blue door in its trunk, blank and featureless. The baby, limp in the travellers arms, made a low, gurgling sound. He looked at it, smiling simply up at him.

A maggot flopped out of its nose.

Horrified, he dropped the baby to the ground, and it vanished.

Juniper clung on to Salih as the explosions after-shocks rolled around them. Her ears were screaming with the noise, and her hip burnt with pain. But the twisted smile still sat guiltily on her face. When Salih had muttered in her ear, That was for Mette, shed seconded his dedication and added Moselys name. Salihs breath stank almost as bad as his sweaty pits, but she was so grateful to hold someone right now that she kept gripping his shoulders as tightly as she could.

Now Salih eased her up, started to steer her back down the side-corridor.

No-ones getting through to the dream chambers now, he said.

We no longer need to.

Juniper spun round in shock at the sound of a familiar voice made strange with crackles and cold whispers.

The words had fallen from Moselys lips.

His pale, sticky face was lodged in the dark torso of the fox lurching out of the shadows towards them.

She stared, shocked speechless, while Salih screamed loud enough for the two of them.

The explosion knocked Webber flat. Tiles catapulted themselves from the weakening walls, scything the air like square razors and crashing all about him.

Having been buried beneath one ceiling already today, Webber put all his efforts into scrambling for entrance to the sleep wall. The tremors made running difficult, but he kept going until he reached the Doctors dream chamber.

The door was cracked wide open. The Doctors face, bathed in the light of spilled filaments, glowed like a moon in the dark of the chamber. He looked gaunt and pained, his eyes rolling like marbles under the loose skin of his closed eyelids.

Webber checked the old mans vital signs. The results were gibberish; they told him nothing.

Or maybe they told him too much.

He tore his eyes away, reminded usefully of how context was key in whatever you read.

And he saw that the connections the Doctor had been outlining hadnt been completed.

The golden filaments waved about, lording it over his silver hair.

The Doctor now seemed deep in coma, but his plan hinged on the connections being made. The datacore would fracture, the dream chambers would be useless and…

He gripped the filaments, tried to concentrate; tried to remember spaghetti diagrams on bright white printouts, the sure movements of Parms plump fingers on the datadisks. He had to make the Doctors maniac ideas work. But the dark glow that lit the sleep wall was fluctuating, brightening more and more, like everyone was waking up.

Not everyone. The Doctors eyes were still closed, his skin pallid and icy cold.

Racking his brains, Webber looked down at the Doctors feet and saw something dark shift there.

His stomach heaved. It looked like a scattering of black petals, blowing about his feet.

The foxes had been here. But how long ago?

Get back from it! shouted Salih, recovering enough wits to move away. But Juniper could only stare into Moselys grey eyes, at his bristly lips. There were other bits of him apparent in the towering foxs bloated body, glistening pinkness of flesh sketched out in the black in deranged lines, a poor caricature of the human form set within it.

She swallowed back the bile rising in her throat. What… have .. you done?

Your leader and I are one.

Why?

To bring life from death. Moselys voice came sluggishly, crackling with age like a bad recording. Your datacore is destroyed. You cannot better us in battle. You cannot hibernate until help arrives. Your people have two options only: help us, or die like us.

Help you? Salih asked suspiciously.

That is what we wish.

Juniper felt a sharp wind blow up in the gloomy corridor, felt splats and scratches against her legs. She knew what was happening, and didnt even jump as the air whooshed and rumbled behind her, as the debris brought down by the explosion stirred and shifted.

The foxes, Salih stammered.

He trailed off as the creatures stalked towards them.

Will they hurt us? she said quietly.

The creature extended its claw and indicated the insignia on her chest. You do not wear the colours of killing, so we will not hurt you.

Salih took her hand and stood beside her. You do know this means Im a cook, dont you? he said nervously, tapping his fingers on his own chest.

You cannot fight us any more. So, help us.

Junipers mind was full of the way she and the others had prepared for their daily patrols, putting on the guard uniforms like they were putting themselves into a different character, one that was permitted

to play with guns and to kill. You mean that if wed not worn the uniforms… We are not fools, the crackling creature assured her. But with your guards all dead, we need not kill others. So all the battles… all this death… you were only doing it all so wed have no option but to help you? We could not make you listen. Junipers eyes filled with tears she couldnt stop. Give us back Mosely.

The fox shook its dark, canine head, and Moselys eyes widened. I speak through your leader so you will understand. There is no time left for misunderstanding.

The other foxes drew in like a winter night behind her. She held out her hand to the wet remains of Moselys face, and something like breath snorted from his nose.

Juniper, he said, in his own voice., his real voice. All these deaths, all this wasted time. Every night, too scared to fall asleep and then too scared of waking up again… Too frightened to reach out to someone else in case theyre taken away. Its all my fault, and Im sorry, Juniper, stood there looking up at me with your hopeful eyes. Im… I should have helped these people, not turned our… my back on you, on them… His voice began to rasp, his lips werent moving at the right time to make the right noises. Help them now, we must all… Always hoped… not scared of them… you and I will… His eyes closed, dipped under the molten black skin of the creature.

Whats happened to him? Juniper sobbed, but the thing didnt reply. Were you making him say all that?

She heard the wheezing breath of the foxes around her, felt Salihs hand squeeze her cold fingers. But Moselys crusty grey lips stayed still and silent.

XV

AT LAST THE WAITING IS OVER.

Susan is a good storyteller, like me. She knows how to say things so they seem real.

She can picture them as I do, even when, like me, she doesnt want to.

Hunhau is excited by the tales we tell. He totters on his stick legs, his worms coil round his cold ribs, teasing him with the memory of living flesh.

He has killed men in beds.

Dead, dead, dead.

And for all we have said

He has come for us now.

His menagerie at his scrappy heels, his death-owls stealing the light from the sky as the walls go away.

The walls crumble all around us, and I can feel every stone.

Hunhau shuffles forwards. His cowl shrinks back from his head and Susan screams at his dead-man face, and his fish-eyes boggling, and his monkey-mouth snarling and laughing all at once. The slug in his mouth, his surrogate tongue, slithers over his maggoty lips at the sight of two little girls to eat.

The owls prey first on the mice and the rats. The jaguar-men peep over Hunhaus bony head, snarling and hissing at the cats and me and Susan.

It looks like well die.

But Olmec is as strong as his old stories.

He runs out of the cupboard and stands between Hunhau and me.

Hes brought an old man with him. He wont leave the cupboard, though. He holds out his arms to Susan and she runs to him. He holds her, holds her the way that makes it all safe, and kisses her on the

head.

Olmec looks at Hunhau: his stinky-fish head, his smelly, soupy body and brittle peg legs.

And he says: Youre only a story.

The owls dont like it. But they know Olmec loves all animals and they wont hurt him.

The jaguar-men growl and snarl, but theyre just cross now they know death is make-believe.

Olmec wants to know what the end of the story is. But I smile at him and he smiles back and neither of us are ready to find out just yet.

But even as Hunhau waves goodbye, the sky is darkening.

The owls white wings are rotting. They drop away, turn to little maggots. The cats leap and spring for the cupboard as the floor festers and crumbles. The cheese isnt fit even for mousetraps, but it kills the wriggly rats just the same. The jaguar-men fall with nothing to hold them up, whizzing through the air, but the air is rotten too. It starts smelling and looking like old milk, and then its all maggots, too. No more trees or sky or sun. All gone. Even the air in my lungs wants to turn maggoty.

I see a baby at my feet and its dancing. Its black eyes are rolling in its head, its getting bigger. Olmec takes my hand and pulls me into the creaking, splintering cupboard to hide. Chloe nudges the cupboard and the back of it opens up. I never knew it did that.

And there is a spiralling staircase here that the baby cant see with its black, blind eyes. The staircase is carved out of wood rings and hidden in the big tree that grows outside. It smells of wet earth and fresh things here. Olmec breathes it in like health.

I start to follow Susan and the old man, quickly up the stairs, but Olmec shakes his head. We must go a different way.

And I wave at Susan, but her grandfather is taking her away, out of sight, into the cool earthy darkness. I tell her everything will be okay as Chloe leads us forwards, scampering down the steps.

I think it will.

SIXTEEN

WEBBER FELL BACK IN SURPRISE AS THE DOCTOR STARTED IN HIS SLEEP. SUDDENLY

the old mans eyes were wide open and glaring, and he snatched for the filaments above his head. What have you done? he whispered as his fingers closed on the connections. I tried to finish what you started, mumbled Webber.

The old man carefully disconnected himself from the filaments that joined him to the chamber. You thought you understood the scientific processes I described?

Sort of. Probably, I think.

The Doctor stared at him in outrage. Always so much babble, Webber: Then he smiled craftily. If you mean yes why dont you say so?

Well, I thought I got what you were up to, but look He scooped up a handful of black scabs. The foxes were here.

They were here a long time ago, Webber, and have remained here ever since. However, the atrocity they sought to commit… He paused impressively. Has been averted.

Webber stared at him, a disbelieving grin creeping onto his face. Then it worked?

The Doctor beamed at him. Yes, my boy, it did. At least, I do hope… His face clouded and he picked with less patience at the filaments hooked in his wrists. Now really, Webber, get out of my light. I have to find

There was a resounding crash of broken glass. Webber froze. The Doctor grabbed hold of his arm, peering down the dusky tunnel.

Grandfather?

The Doctor gave a shout of delight, and ran off down the dark tunnel. My child! he cried. Oh, my child, I sensed you were close…

The two dark shapes, not quite human, stumbled into each others

arms, spoke and muttered in quiet, excited voices like the children at Christmas. Webber wondered if he should spoil the mood, tell them that while the two of them may have found each other at last, they could well be entombed forever.

It didnt take him long to decide that hed keep that to himself for now.

He trudged off, trembling but jubilant, to see just how extensive the damage was.

And found three foxes clearing the debris, while another held Salih and Juniper in its arms.

AFTER

IT WAS A FUNNY THING. THEYD LOST; THE FOXES HAD BEATEN THEM, BUT TO WEBBER

it didnt seem that way.

The Refuge was under occupation; and the foxes had brought new occupation for those that had hidden there these long months. The people were moving about in the open again.

The worst had happened, and they had come through it. And now life was calmer.

Medics and mentors were working again in the gene labs and eviscerator suites, escorted by the handful of surviving guards, taking fragments of fox flesh apart, protein by protein. Searching for some way to reverse the genetic decay the creatures had inflicted on themselves. To the foxes, the treatments and approaches were alien, fresh. And the mentors had already found that the cellular adaptability of the fox cells opened up huge new avenues of research. It was hoped that in time they would find an answer for the foxes, and then the foxes would go. And they would leave behind a genetic legacy that could revolutionise the science of man.

Webber imagined the Corporations would be knocking again on the Refuges doors, desperate to sniff out those secrets, some day.

There was the old work waiting to be done too, of course. And thanks to the Doctor and his friend (who was calling herself Susan, even though it seemed to rankle with the old man), the children in their care would sleep on safely until staff could be spared to tend them.

In the aftermath of the fox incursion, it had been left to Webber, Juniper and Salih to inform all the others of the situation.

Salih had put things succinctly: Were totally screwed. If we dont do what they say, theyll kill us. He scrubbed a hand through his greasy hair. But then again

at least we wont die fighting in the patrols outside, or lie here waiting for the foxes to come and get us. Cause theyve already got us.

As inspiring orations went, Salihs was rubbish. But the simple truism he touched on weve lost our freedom, but since it was largely the freedom to cower in fear and misery in dingy corridors, what have we really lost? ensured that the people took it stoically enough. Instead of working for the disinterested Corporations, they would work for the foxes. If they didnt, they would die, and so, too, would the children in their sleep. As the foxes had calculated, they were out of options now. And things could be worse, after all; as an invasion force, the foxes came and went.

Trust was the hardest thing. No human could believe that the foxes would stop the killing, and the foxes werent totally convinced that they could count on the humans

support while the dream chambers still offered them escape. But the uneasy relationship continued, with little serious talk of an uprising.

The Doctor and Susan had communicated with the foxes at Webbers behest; they were better at seeing the things the foxes said than anyone else. They petitioned for the continued protection of the dream chambers. The foxes had wanted them destroyed, so there was nowhere the humans could go but after a trial period, once theyd seen the humans were playing along, they relented.

Webber had wrested an explanation from the Doctor a few days later, as the enormity of that days events were still sinking in.

The foxes had insinuated one of their number into that key dream chamber and interfaced with the datacore, just as the Doctor had. Working to their alien codes, they had been gradually eroding the systems power-throughputs for weeks. Jills dream world a separate realm from that generated by the datacore, but one that shared its power

had been the only thing that had kept the network together.

The fox entity had been confused by a world of imagination within a world of digital certainties. Helpless, unable to complete its objective, it had been interpreted visually in Jills world as a baby. It had sought the nerve centre of her world, the core, where Jills presence resided.

The foxes had finally despaired of their entity shutting down the systems. Fearing it lost, able to feel the continued presence of those two hundred childish minds, and with their own time running out, they had resolved to destroy the chambers by force.

Only one had disagreed; the one that had come to Mosely, begging for help.

The foxes werent to have known that their entity had finally found its way to the heart of Jills world, and that it had been ready to destroy it from within. With its mission achieved, or so it believed, it had blinked out of existence.

The Doctors rewiring (a gross simplification, young man) had stopped them, once Webber had completed the connections. But their work had left Jills world so intimately linked to the datacore that it could not be isolated or removed without the entitys legacy crippling the systems.

Jill could not be woken. Her consciousness might never emerge from the debris of the datacore.

She wont want to. Susans young, elfin face was sombre and assured. Shes found Olmec there. Itll be a calmer place now shes not scared or angry. And because the datacore isnt trying to silence her, to reject her world, her mouth will be given back to her. Shell be able to speak again. She smiled up at her grandfather. Lips are to stop your mouth from fraying, did you know that?

Such nonsense you speak, child, huffed the Doctor, and she laughed at him fondly.

Well, Webber, your battle is lost. The old man looked at him gravely. And if you attempt to betray the creatures, they shall surely destroy both you and all your work.

We all know that, said Webber. Just as we know it wont be forever. Susan smiled mischievously. I heard people saying theyd sooner revolt against Salih and his crimes against food, as he tries to stretch out the rations.

Webber grimaced. Thats not funny. But Juniper reckons we can grow more of the food outside. Now were not at risk from surprise attacks.

A very sensibe enterprise, the Doctor said approvingly. He rose and smiled at his young charge. Perhaps we might survey the land ourselves, my child. Take a little air.

A look pessed between them thatl Webber couIdnt quite fathom.

But he never saw either of them again.

Grandfather, must we go strightaway? Without even saying goodbye!

We must, my child, he said gently, as they strolled back across the stony surface of Iwa to the Ship. These humans would ask us too many questions, and doubtless they would want us to take them with us.

But I want to know how their story ends, she complained. To know if a cure is found, and if the foxes really will leave in peace. lf the dream chambers are kept safe. lf Jill…

Now, now, really, my dear. He chuckled to himself. You must know by now, stories have no real end, child.

Ive told you, Grandfather, she said quietly. I dont think of myself as a child any longer. And Id like you to call me Susan.

A childs caprice. He listened to her sigh.

But didnt you like having a name… a title… Doctor?

Hmm? the old man smiled. Doctor, indeed…

Theyre a funny people, arent they, humans? So like us in some ways, and yet

Dont be preposterous. He scowled at her. Aside from a superficial physical similarity…

Yes, but I like them. Their lives are so short, so fragile. She ran her fingers through her long dark hair. They dream, but must age and die before they can see those dreams fulfilled. She gave him a sad smile. Except for Jill.

Youre a romantic, my dear. He squeezed her hand. Mostly these humans are thoughtless and savage, with outmoded ideas about practically everything. He chortled. Yet, they may merit further study.

I marvel that they have survived as a species to reach into space.

Because they dream, she said.

The first stars were twinkling in the darkening warmth of the clear blue sky. They stared into its expanse. ln his mind, he was already plotting their next course.

Perhaps one day the Ship will take us to their home. She slipped her key into the lock hidden in the rock. To Earth.

Who knows… Susan.

Together they went inside, and off again into the unknown.

Juniper peered through the dark glass that held her apart from the retired Co-ordinator Mosely, tapped her fingers against the glass, read and reread the vital signs.

The foxes didnt like humans to go near the dream chambers. But the one that had joined with him to make them see, to make them understand… it understood why she came here now, some nights.

Moselys condition was critical. The joining with the creature had not helped his injuries. It had put extra strain on his dying heart, and driven his consciousness deep into hiding.

She knew, though, that if hed woken to know that all the sacrifices had been in vain, that every decision hed given had led them only to defeat, there would be no spark of life to preserve in the cold dreams of the dark glass.

You always wanted to be brilliant, she whispered fondly. And you tried. You really did try. History doesnt celebrate the people who tried but failed. But Webber will remember.

Webber had read enough words. He was going to start writing them. The Refuge the pitfalls, problems and extraordinary conclusion of its first era and now, perhaps, the dawn of a second would be the subject matter for his debut. She would help him.

It would pass the time, and they had both decided that Earth needed an account of what had happened, written by those who were there. Those who had lived through those sinister days, and held on to hope.

Junipers hip burnt almost constantly. The pain made her think of Mosely, made her want to curl up quietly beside him sometimes, to drift out into the new, unknowable possibilities of the datacores sleep programmes.

When the foxes were gone, shed try it. Maybe Mosely would dream, and maybe he would think of her.

She would listen out for him, in her sleep.

ALWAYS

I STAND WITH OLMEC ON A GREAT, GREEN, GRASSY HILL. WERE LOOKING OUT OVER ALL

the world together, and were smiling.

We found ourselves here when all the bad things washed away. The door in the tree opened up on to this place, and its like I always thought it would be. Its safe and warm, and the only ghosts are those of Olmecs animals. We care for them together.

There is no pain. No time. No passing.

We sleep under Xbalanques silver moon and rise to the thrilling red of Hunahpu the sun. Sometimes I look at Olmec and he is old. Then I blink and rub my eyes, and he is just the same. Always, his stories fly through the warm nights like embers, and our fingers curl together in the telling.

Once we heard a strange sound soar through our landscape, a scraping, wheezing, groaning sound. The sort of silly sound that only something very special could make.

I remembered Susan, and the old man who led us out from the cold, boring life in the dead lands.

I told Olmec. It made us smile all the day, and warmed us through the night.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

TARA SAMMS WAS BORN IN 1971 AND HAS WATCHED FAR TOO MUCH TELEVISION ALL

her life. A woman of mystery, she enjoys sitting both behind and in front of the artists easel and is the vexed owner of an insomniac hound dog: he slept once.